

Sevasadan (1919)

Story Premchand wrote and published this novel in Hindi, although it was later translated by him into Urdu. The story is set in Benares (Varnasi), perhaps India's holiest city, which underscores the degradation of the main character, Suman. Suman is a beautiful young woman, the much-indulged daughter of a police inspector. The plot is kickstarted by a decision made by the inspector. He wants to marry his daughter into a wealthy family but lacks the money to pay the large dowry required for such an arrangement. In desperation, he takes bribes, is arrested and put in jail. Things go from bad to worse, as his wife, Suman's mother, spends all the family money in a campaign to get him released. Although he is freed, they don't have the wherewithal to support their beloved daughter, so they send her to live with an uncle. Bad decision number two. The uncle's family mistreats her and eventually marries her off to a poor man, Gajadhar. Suman tries to be a good wife, but unused to poverty, fails and is thrown out by her husband.

With nowhere to turn, she stays for a while in the house of a friend, whose husband is a lawyer, but is turned out because of gossip. She wanders the streets until a 'madam' picks her up and introduces her to a brothel. As a beautiful woman, she becomes the favourite of many customers, including Sadansingh, for whom she develops an affection. When the city government, keen to clean up immorality, orders these brothels to be relocated outside the city, Suman leaves the brothel and starts to work as a teacher in a home for widowed women. She leaves that position and stays briefly in her sister's house, but leaves that, too, because her brother-in-law is attracted to her. In the end, she joins an institution that houses the children of former prostitutes. The house is called *seva-sadan*, 'the house of [charitable] service,' which gives the novel its title.

Characters

Suman Suman is a beautiful Brahmin girl and the daughter of a policeman, who is forced into prostitution and then, through her own suffering and understanding of society, frees herself and devotes her life to helping the children of prostitutes.

Bholi Bholi is the courtesan, who lives opposite Suman when Suman was married. Bholi holds herself in high esteem, something which is far from Suman's expectation. Bholi is not educated or beautiful, like Suman, but she has an honesty and self-respect that is admirable.

Gajadhar Gajadhar is Suman's husband. He is portrayed as a typical traditional Hindu man, who wants his wife to remain in purdah. He becomes angry when Suman defies him and goes outside the house.

Padamsingh Padamsingh is a lawyer, who represents the insensitivity of wealthy people toward the position of women. Although he prides himself on being socially progressive, he (inadvertently, it must be said) sends Suman into prostitution when he turns her out of his house because of rumours of illicit love.

Themes

Domestic space The spatial confinement of women is another theme in the novel, which Premchand subtly explores. When Suman marries the poor man, she is forced to live in a house that lacks a courtyard, an open space in the centre of a house, where women traditionally gather to relax and talk. It is outside, in that there is no roof, yet inside the walls of the house. A perfect solution to tradition, which requires married women to avoid being seen in public. Without the convenience of this courtyard, Suman takes to sitting on the threshold of the house, half in and half out of the house, which leads to arguments with her husband and, ultimately, to her being forced to leave. In brief, the lack of a courtyard drives her to prostitution.

Hypocrisy In this complex novel, the author skewers the ruling elite in several ways. The politicians seek to save their reputations by moving the brothels beyond the city walls, without really caring for the women at all. Similarly, Padamsingh is a wealthy lawyer who has self-righteously taken on the mantle of social reformer. He takes on the task of eradicating prostitution in Benares in order to save young men and women from moral decadence and ill health. However, he actually sends Suman into prostitution when he forces her to leave his house in order to protect his reputation.

Corruption Another theme in this multi-layered novel is the corruption in the local government of Benares. When the Municipal Board takes the decision to remove the brothels from the city centre, in order to preserve the sacred reputation of the city, it is clear that the politicians are more concerned with their own reputation than the plight of the women. At first the discussion among the board members appear to divide along Hindu-Muslim lines, but then we see that devious and self-serving people are found in both groups.