

Suman (Premchand's novel Sevasadan, 1919) Reflective

Character Suman is the protagonist of this social reformist novel written by Premchand in Hindi. It is through her dramatic change in circumstances, her consequent suffering and eventual awareness that the author reveals his views on the key issues of social reform in twentieth-century India: the status of women, child marriage, sexuality and the gendered difference between the domestic and public spheres.

Suman is a beautiful and pampered daughter of a middle-class family, who always expects to be favoured over her younger sister. However, because of the dowry system, she finds herself living in poverty and eventually as a prostitute. Suman has been brought up 'properly' with the 'correct' values, but once outside the bubble of her comfortable family, she becomes insensitive to others. In particular, she assumes a self-righteous superiority in relation to the courtesans whom she comes to know. Confronted with realities that she is not prepared for, she shows resilience and eventually gains an understanding of the status of women. In the end, she commits her life to serving the children of former prostitutes. Her initial condemnation of prostitutes and her later acceptance and eventual service to them symbolises the author's hopes for a change in the country as a whole.

Activities Suman plays as a young girl, swings in the yard and eats sweets. As wife to a poor man, she does typical housework but also strays outside and makes friends with other women, visits their houses and talks with them. Her outside activities anger her husband and many chapters are filled with their arguments. She also performs the many religious rituals expected of a Hindu wife.

Illustrative moments

Confused Suman's moral code is thrown into confusion through her observation of Bholi, a courtesan who lives across the street from her and her poor husband. Suman has been taught that prostitutes are wicked and depraved, and she is surprised to see that respectable men in the city treat Bholi with respect. Then comes a dramatic moment when she watches Bholi perform a dance in a temple and registers the deep impression it makes on the audience. 'The very prostitute whom I wanted to humble with my pious ways is the recipient of esteem in this holy place, where I cannot even find a place to sit.'

Reflective Suman also begins to analyse the status of women, almost like a social scientist, when she becomes friends with other women, including a courtesan. Reflecting on their positions in life, she realises that both marriage and prostitution are underpinned by financial arrangements. Of Bholi, the courtesan, she thinks, 'She is free; [but] there are shackles on my feet...She doesn't care whether or not the dogs bark about her, but I am afraid of what people will say and think. She can go outside of purdah, while I am cloistered in it. This shame and this fear of derision have made me the servant of others.'

Decisive Suman's life is finally changed through her encounter with a fervent social reformer. When he tells her that she is degrading herself in serving her body for pleasure, she immediately makes a decision. 'I will sing and dance, but have no sexual contact with men.' This decision slowly leads her out of prostitution and into her life of self-sacrifice in the charitable home for the children of former prostitutes.