

SEVASADAN

Premchand

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.

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 appears to divide along Hindu-Muslim lines, but then we see that devious and self-serving people are found in both groups.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTER

SUMAN (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.

BHOLI (Pragmatic)

Character Bholi is a 'plump' (i.e., well-fed and comfortable) courtesan who lives in comparative luxury, visited at night by her well-heeled clients. She lives directly across the street from the long-suffering, virtuous Suman, the protagonist of this social reform novel of the 1919. Bholi has few, if any, qualms about her profession, which had no higher status then than it does now. Because of her personality, however, as well as her dignity and the quality of the singing and dancing that she provides at her salon, she earns the respect of the respectable men in town, the bankers, lawyers and wealthy businessmen. Suman is then astounded to see that Bholi actually sponsors a traditional Muslim event (*moulood*), at which religious leaders, including imams, gather in her house. More than this, Bholi is also the centre of attraction at an event held in the local Hindu temple. The final sign of Bholi's status in the town is that she is offered a special bench to sit on in the park and presented with a bouquet of flowers. Bholi is also a spokeswoman for female emancipation, and Suman becomes her disciple. Possessing courage, charm and empathy, Bholi is one of the great female characters of early Indian fiction.

Activities Bholi is extremely active, receiving her clients at home, where she arranges dancing and singing to keep everyone entertained. She also sponsors traditional events for the Muslim and Hindu communities in the town, and she herself is hired to perform in the local Hindu temple. When not engaged in these public events, she spends a lot of time taking care of herself, with long perfumed baths and massages.

Illustrative moments

Pragmatic Bholi is, above all else, a pragmatic person. That is why, of course, she has become a courtesan—it's the best way of making money to support herself. Her practical approach to everything is demonstrated when she first encourages Suman to join her as a courtesan. 'You'll pick it up in six months,' she says with a wink. 'No one really asks for elaborate songs. You don't need to know classical forms and tunes. Ghazals [popular songs] aren't fashionable here. If you learn a few short tunes and popular songs from the theatre, that will be enough.' When Suman expresses her doubts, Bholi teaches her that to feel shame is 'a hollow notion' in a society where men are hypocrites. 'You shouldn't feel shy either,' she says. 'You'll learn to get rid of the bad ones [clients] by exposing their weaknesses and then they'll leave you. The good ones you flatter and keep.' This turns out to be extremely practical advice from an expert to a novice.

Empathetic Bholi is also a person of great empathy. This quality is illustrated when she first meets Suman, the young woman who has been forced into a disastrous marriage with an old man. When Suman appears at her door, Bholi realises immediately what is wrong. Her gentle, but persistent, questions eventually reveal Suman's troubled marriage. Then Bholi begins to encourage her to have more self-respect. 'You are a beautiful woman,' she says, 'but we are not like a goat that has to be tied to the same old man for a lifetime. God would not have given you such beauty if he wanted that. No, we have such backward customs in this country. But we do not have to stay in a marriage, if that marriage does not give us happiness. You can be free.' After her lively speech, Bholi leads Suman to a well-equipped bathroom and puts her in the care of a lady servant, who bathes her and dresses her hair. Bholi has transformed Suman, but only because she first understood her troubles.

PADAM SINGH (Weak-willed)

Character Padam Singh is a respected lawyer and a member of the governing council, called the Municipal Board, of a small city. He is married, and, although the relationship with his wife is not always blissful, it is more harmonious than the other marriages in the story. He is an educated and professional man, and a person of some intelligence and goodwill. He is capable of analysing the motives of other characters in the novel, especially his fellow members of the Municipal Board, and he is able to imagine the various pressures, domestic, economic and political, that influence their words and deeds. His fatal flaw is a lack of moral courage. In his failure to stand up for what he knows is right, in terms of social reform, he is the prime target in this novelistic critique of local government in north India in the early decades of the twentieth century. Not only that, he also puts his own personal

reputation above the welfare of the very person (Suman, the woman forced into prostitution) whom he wishes to help. While this is a novel with a political message, the author gives Padam Singh enough complexity to enable us as readers to understand his confused thinking, even if we don't always sympathise with him. He is earnest and sincere, but he is too weak to buck the system. We can judge him as a hypocrite, and he does take refuge in self-justification, but the author encourages us to go beyond easy moral condemnation and understand the wider social and political dynamic behind the scenes.

Activities As a lawyer, Padam Singh spends his mornings in his practice, dealing with cases and interviewing clients. His afternoons are spent either in the chambers of local government, where he is a member of the Municipal Board, or at his club, where he sometimes plays polo. The Board meetings are described in some detail, so we often see Padam Singh speaking in a debate or reacting to what someone else has said.

Illustrative moments

Reformer Padam Singh is a well-intentioned reformer, who battles with conservative members of the Municipal Board. When the Board debates the issue of prostitution in the city, he and others suggest creating a separate area outside the city where prostitutes could practice their profession, but others find this despicable and condemn courtesans as social 'vermin.' At this point, Padam Singh has his moment of glory and defends prostitutes with these words: 'We do not have any right to hate them. It is our own sinful desire, our social depression, our evil customs that have taken the form of the prostitute. On what moral ground can we hate them?' This is a radical position, and we assume it is the author himself speaking. Very few men in a small city in north India in the early twentieth century would have held such views or been able to articulate them so clearly. Padam Singh loses the debate in the Board meeting, but he has won our respect, at least for the time being.

Weak-willed Later, Padam Singh, shows the other side of his character: his inability (or unwillingness) to implement his publicly expressed progressive ideas in his private life. In fact, there are two instances of this failure that are so revealing that I will describe them both. In one, Padam Singh, and his equally progressive wife, have given Suman refuge after she leaves her abusive and elderly husband. However, when rumours spread about Padam Singh's illicit affair with Suman, he is unable to withstand the threat to his public image and tells her to leave. Now, she has nowhere to go and ends up as a courtesan. In the second example, at the very end of the story, Padam Singh and his wife go to visit Suman in the house where she herself now works as a social reformer, helping to rehabilitate 'fallen women.' He and his wife arrive in a carriage, and she gets down but he does not. He sits inside the carriage, unable to face Suman, the woman whom he treated so badly. We feel something for his humiliation, but then we remember that Suman's disgrace was in part caused by him and was so much more painful.