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Suman's Dilemma in Premchand's *Sevasadan*: A Crisis of Identity

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Abstract:

The present paper explores how vagaries of mind disturb the mental poise of a woman, rendering her life miserable. Premchand in his novel *Sevasadan* exemplifies this woman through the character of Suman, the heroine of the novel. Suman's weakness is that she aspires to have a luxurious life free from inhibitions and bridles while commanding admiration and respect from others. As a result, she remains in constant search of her real identity. Her problem is aggravated by her mismatched marriage and social hypocrisy surrounding her life. She leaves her husband and moves into a brothel. She quits it, finds employment in widows' home and then shifts into her sister's family. Finally, Suman is employed in a destitute home (*Sevasadan*) run by her former husband; however, peace and contentment elude her. She emerges from the novel as an enigmatic, unstable, pessimist and pathetic character, destined to be never happy.

Keywords: Identity-crisis, Insecurity Syndrome, Flighty and Arrogant, Mental Poise, Offended Psyche, Courtesan, Chaste, Idealism, Incarnation, Happiness, Contentment, Moulod, Mujra, Purdah.

Suman, the woman protagonist of *Sevasadan*, is a victim of identity crisis and insecurity syndrome *ab initio*. She desires to be better than those around her. The eldest daughter of an honest Police Sub-Inspector Krishnachandra, she is reared in a comfortable home with care along with her younger sister, Shanta. However, the two sisters are temperamentally dissimilar; for instance, Suman is "beautiful, flighty, and arrogant", while Shanta, is "innocent, quiet and polite." (Premchand 2) Accordingly, Suman always desires better treatment than her sister, so much so that "If similar saris were bought for both sisters, Suman would sulk. Shanta was content with whatever came her way." (Premchand 2) However, the harsh realities of life soon over take Suman's poise and her comfortable existence is suddenly shattered, as her father fails to find a suitable match for her, because of his inability to meet the dowry requirements. Dejected Krishnachandra repents

over his honesty, "Had I not been afraid of sin, I wouldn't have to stumble upon like this." (Guru 139) He, therefore, resolves to take bribes in future like others to be able at least to meet his daughter's dowry expenses. Conversely, being naïve in the field, he is caught and imprisoned, after which his wife spends all her savings trying in vain to secure his release. It brings about a swift and decisive change in Suman's destiny, as her mother, forced to depend on her brother Umanath for help, sends Suman to his place, but she is ill-treated there. Nevertheless, Umanath playing the role of a guardian tries for one year to get a suitable match for Suman, but does not succeed, as he too does not have enough financial resources to meet the dowry demands of the prospective parties. Eventually, the desperate maternal uncle marries her off to Gajadhar, a poor widower past thirty years, but superior in caste hierarchy, thus, overlooking "prestige, education, looks, and moral qualities...holding out only for someone of a high caste," as it "was one requirement he would not give up on" (Premchand 13).

After the marriage, Suman, as Dalmia describes, "is transported from her well-to-do home in a rural district to the stench of the narrow lanes in the inner city and the claustrophobia of the small dark rooms in which she houses with her elderly husband" (Dalmia 326). Nevertheless, she tries her best to adjust in her marital home, attending on her household chores sincerely and with a certain amount of pleasure, yet feels frustrated when her husband advises her against being extravagant, as "her only failings are vanity and love of display, venial enough in one who has seen better days" (Sadiq 347). Dalmia figuratively describes the initial years of Suman's marital life, saying that "Confined within the narrow walls of her new home in the city and initially humoured and pampered by her husband Gajadhar, Suman managed to lead an exemplary life as a dutiful housewife for the first two years of her married life" (Dalmia 331). However, soon she feels bored and frustrated with her lot, which leads her to keep aloof even from her neighborly women. She thinks herself as the most unfortunate person in the world, as while women living in her vicinity buy new clothes and ornaments; she has to clamour for the bare necessities. In fact, one of the biggest flaws in her character is that she is devoid of patience, because "As a child, she had been taught only to please herself and enjoy life. She had not learned the moral lesson nor acquired the religious education that plants the seeds of contentment in one's mind." (Premchand 16) Therefore, she invests herself to tempting the young passersby, positioning herself in her room in a way that even if busy in some work she is noticed by them through the curtain, and she "received endless pleasure from this kind of flirting. She played these games not out of wickedness but to show off the lustre of her beauty to win over the hearts of others" (Premchand 17). Meanwhile, as though to arouse her suppressed passion for mundane pleasures further, Bholi Bai, a courtesan "lives in great style opposite her humble dwelling" (Sadiq 347). In the words of Dalmia, "...just opposite her lived the plump Bholi, luxuriating in the comfort of her well-lit and well-aired home and visited nightly by the town gentry"

(Dalmia 331). However, “Being a courtesan in those days was to have sunk to the lowest low. If a courtesan had siblings, it is unlikely anyone would ever marry them because of their association to the courtesan.” (<http://lotusreads.blogspot.in/2006/08/sevasadan.html>) Accordingly, Suman too has learned from her early childhood that such women are mean and depraved and, therefore, feels proud of her being a virtuous woman. Nevertheless, she feels frustrated to find that Bholi despite her mean profession commands great respect in the society and holds sway over the highest gentry of the city who throng in large numbers at her place every night to watch her musical performances. Suman’s dilemma is “Whilst feeling that she, as a chaste woman, is superior to Bholi Bai, she is envious of Bholi’s status and lifestyle. She tries her hand at piety, but it is not a genuine religious feeling, but rather, a desire for recognition and respect.” (Safadi 32) Ultimately, she begins to realize genuinely that she can never get the same respect and recognition in the public life as available to Bholi, which turns her even more offended.

Close on the heels, a few sporadic incidents take place, which contributes to changes in the course of Suman’s life and turns her from an ordinary housewife into a prostitute. First, to her astonishment she finds Bholi holding *moulood* (a religious congregation of Muslims), which even the dignitaries of the city came to attend, including rich people like her husband’s employer and religious leaders like the Maulana Sahib. She turns indignant at this social hypocrisy, but her husband pacifies her, saying, “...they are only a few, as the English education has made people liberal who don’t hate them any longer, moreover, Bholibai commands great respect in the society.” (Guru 142) Nevertheless, Suman’s unstable mind still compels her to peep into Bholi’s lavish ways, which the latter invariably notices and one day beckons the former to her place. Although Gajadhar strongly disapproves the idea of Suman visiting Bholi, she fails to resist the temptation. Annoyed Gajadhar further tells his wife that money does not make somebody great, “You might have been swayed by the *moulood* day gathering at Bholi’s place, but none of those present there was a gentleman ...such people in their arrogance of being rich, ignore religion” (Guru 142). Thereafter, Suman tries to adopt pious ways, by taking a dip in the holy river daily and recites lines from Tulasi’s Ramayana to the women of her neighborhood, which as Dalmia remarks, does not bring peace to her soul, but “it gave her the satisfaction of being morally more elevated than the likes of Bholi” (Dalmia 331).

Soon there occurs another incident to disturb Suman’s poise; it is the Ramnavami celebrations held in a local temple, which Suman visits in the company of her friends. Suman is taken aback to see Bholi sitting at the centre as the star attraction of the day and “each gesture she made observed eagerly by the most prominent citizens of the city, the rich, the learned and the pious, many of whom she had seen at the river front” (Dalmia 331). She realizes that “the very prostitute whom I want to humble by my hollow ways of piety – is treated with esteem in this assembly of great men, in the abode of Thakurji

(temple), where I find no space even to stand” (Guru 142). Giving expression to Suman's anguish Dalmia says, “Suman stood there as is struck by a thunderbolt, her pride shattered to bits. Not only did wealth bow at Bholi's feet, even religion sought her favour” (Dalmia 331). Distraught and disillusioned, Suman loses her faith in religion and finds her husband's plea hollow that men who crowd around Bholi are worthless fellows. The third incident which shatters Suman's conscience further is the raw deal she receives at the Beni Bagh Park, where the watchman unseats her as she attempts to sit on a bench, but when Bholi along with another woman arrive there the same fellow not only seats them honorably on the bench, but also greets them with a bouquet of fresh flowers, as if “The city's public spaces are reserved for public women, not for poorly dressed creatures like her” (Dalmia 331). Suman, with her offended psyche, scolds the keeper for his partial and rude behavior, which he quickly rebuffs, “Do you aspire to be their equal?” (Dalmia 331) Despite this, Suman tries to sit on the bench once again, but this time the keeper turns ruder and pushes her aside, only to be rescued by a noble couple Pandit Padam Singh, a lawyer and his cultured wife Subhadra, passing through in their carriage. Suman befriends Subhadra, who “provides her with a model of respectable society,” which, however, does not prove enough as “Suman is eaten up by her desire for nice things and her envy of people who have a higher status than she does.” (Safadi 33) The fourth and the final incident that proves crucial and leads Suman to overcome her hesitation is Bholi's *mujra*, which Padam Singh holds at his place on Holi to celebrate his victory as a member to the Municipal Board. Suman goes there and watches the performance along with Subhadra from behind the curtain, and is overtaken by a sense of vanity and envy, as she compares herself with Bholi, “She is dark; I am fair. She is plump, I am slender” (Premchand 32). Further, she thinks rather fairly that in a similar getup, she would look prettier than Bholi and her voice is better as well. Moreover, “she has a good ear and a quick memory. She would not need more than a month to learn to sing better than Bholi. She can also cast sidelong glances and she also knows how to smile demurely” (Dalmia 332). However, the way Bholi captivates men and the amount of freedom she enjoys turns Suman extremely envious; she ponders over the matter coolly and comparing herself with Bholi appreciates that she “is independent while her own feet are in shackles...She is outside purdah while I am inside it. She chirps freely as she hops from branch to branch, while I cling to one branch. It is shame, the fear of ridicule, which makes me the servant of others (Dalmia 332).

Suman now finds herself in a quandary as to whether she should languish as a humiliated and docile housewife with a poor and aged husband or should pursue a free and luxurious life like Bholi. However, soon she gets her way as when she returns home from Padam Singh's place well past midnight, her indignant husband refuses her to get in. In fact, this is what Suman herself has wanted as distraught by the lopsided social norms coupled with her own ambitions and indomitable urge for freedom she has already made up her

mind to become a courtesan herself. Commenting on her exit Safadi remarks, “Suman, a married woman, chose of her own volition, albeit in difficult circumstances, to become a courtesan” (Safadi 26). While Dalmia describes her exit allegorically, “Just as Nora in *The Doll’s House* Suman picks up her suitcase and departs into an unknown and uncertain future” (Dalmia 332). Nonetheless, she still hesitates in declaring her as a public woman and is reluctant to go to Bholi, as “she possessed the natural human aversion to wrong-doing” (Premchand 45). She, therefore, prefers to seek the protection of Padam Singh and stays with the family, which though does not last long, as “Padam Singh fears for his reputation once word about her putative relationship to him begins to spread in the bazaar” (Dalmia 332). Suman approaches Bholi even though she still “genuinely prides herself on her chastity and has severe misgivings” (Safadi 33). According to Chauhan, “The change in her approach towards her (Bholi) from detestation to her gradual tilt towards her and ultimately her willingness even to live with her is the consequence of the impact of the social reaction on her” (Chauhan 81). Bholi as expected welcomes Suman warmly, persuades her to stay with her, and makes her comfortable there. However, having bathed with the perfumed soap and clad in a new sari when Suman observes herself in the mirror, her suppressed vanity triumphs over her doubts. For, “It seemed as if the idol of some beauty stood before her. Suman had never realized she was so beautiful. Shame-free pride had made her lotus-blossom face bloom and there was something absolutely intoxicating about her eyes” (Premchand 47) The beautiful and talented Suman soon becomes a famous name in the market of beauty, who under the able guidance of Bholi does not take long to learn the ways of *kotha*, the art of singing and the ruse of enticing people. She, however, “resolves to defend her chastity on all costs and never compromise her virtue, but to sing and dance alone” (Guru 145). Although as a courtesan, Suman finds the glamorous life she has been aspiring for, she soon reaches at the point of saturation because of her moody demeanor. Since for her, as Safadi remarks, “the grass on the other side is always greener,” she painfully “discovers that the respect she thought went with it is really only an illusion” (Safadi 33). However, to her great relief, meanwhile she encounters a young man named Sadan Singh, who is the nephew of Padam Singh, her own well-wisher. Both feel drawn towards one another and Sadan, as Dalmia says, turns out as “one of the many ardent suitors who linger at her door. And Suman cannot help being gratified by his wooing” (Dalmia 333) However, having recognized his real identity Suman shows her class and “Out of respect for Subadhra and Padamsingh, she denies herself the happiness of a relationship with him.” (Safadi 33) Later, she again behaves “with considerable courage and dignity when she returns to Padamsingh the bracelet Sadan has stolen for her” (Safadi 33).

Meanwhile, a few important changes occur in the socio-cultural fabric of the city as the social reformers and the Municipal Board in their wisdom think it worthwhile to bar the courtesans from practicing in the city publicly. It naturally affects adversely the free flow

of relationship between Suman and Sadan, as now "Suman's private problems become linked to the city's problems and its changing face. Private and public are thus extricably intertwined" (Dalmia 326). Vitthaldas, a social reformer and missionary tries to convince Suman to return to a 'dignified profession', but fails to specify as to what this profession really is. However, as a result of his persistent pleadings Suman eventually "realized for the first time that happiness was born out of contentment, and respect out of service" (Premchand 72). In the meantime, she also comes to know that it is because of her odious profession that the marriage of her younger sister Shanta has failed to materialize and that her prospective groom is none else than Sadan, her own favorite client. Thus, persuaded by her own conscience and the pleadings of Vitthaldas, Suman bids good bye to the brothel to live in the widows' home (*vidhva-ashram*), a charitable institution that looks after helpless widows. Suman's reflexive conduct again becomes evident as no sooner she enters the ashram than the "feisty, mischievous Suman disappears" and "a paragon of virtue" replaces "the arrogant, vain, shallow Suman" (Safadi 34). In the ashram Suman does all the works voluntarily, which besides dusting rooms, teaching widows the art of sewing, cooking and singing devotional songs, etc. also include self-study, which she does as if to "repent for all of her sins", and "only God knows what she feels, but she seems a completely changed woman" (Premchand 157). However, Suman's life takes another turn as coincidentally she is united there with her younger sister Shanta, who dejected by the rejection of her marriage has already joined the same ashram. Nevertheless internally Suman is not happy there, in the face of the common feeling that "the home's reputation is sullied by her presence" (Sattar 2006). Therefore, the two sisters quit the home, whom later Sadan encounters at the riverbank, and notes that in Suman, there is "no laughing rosy lips, no sparkling eyes" and there is "the heaviness in her gait and the lines of despair on her face" (Premchand, 171). Later, following a series of coincidences, the identity of Shanta and Sadan becomes open, which leads them to unite into a married couple. Suman too goes to live with them, but there she soon faces a far graver problem, as "Shanta is reminded incessantly of Sadan's former attachment to Suman and she watches each move Suman makes with suspicion and dislike" (Dalmia 343). Besides, now happy with her husband, Shanta taunts and terrorizes her, whereas Suman always "craves recognition for her efforts, and the lack of it makes her life unbearable" (Safadi 34). In fact, "it distressed her extremely to live as a non-entity in this household" (Azfar 228). Owing to this, Suman, perhaps for the first time, finds herself in a helpless state and devoid of courage to face her sister any longer; she wants to end her life by drowning herself. However, at this crucial juncture her former husband Gajadhar now turned into a recluse known Gajanand dashes in and saves her life. He offers her work in the orphanage he runs, which leads to Suman's yet another transformation, as "Wonderful feelings of faith and devotion dawned in her heart" and "she hadn't in her wildest dreams believed that ... she would be given such a great opportunity to serve" ((Premchand 264-265). Gajadhar too perhaps grabs it as an opportunity to expiate for

having turned Suman out of his house, as Chauhan says, “his renunciation and becoming an ascetic is atonement for his actions. Who in the end is a social reformer and represents the idealism of the novelist” (Chauhan 82).

Thus, Suman remains busy in her quest for identity, though her pathetic story seems to end on a positive note “with running Seva Sadan (Home of Service), a shelter for the children of former prostitutes” (Sattar 2006). However, whether or not she gets the peace of mind still remains a moot question, about which Dalmia gives a dismal remark when she says, “Suman’s denial and closing words of gratitude speak more of her loneliness and isolation, and her need to be connected to the world she once knew, than of any real satisfaction derived from being there” (Dalmia 344). At the end, Suman, as Safadi says, “emerges as an unpredictable, unstable and pessimist character as she sees the world “as a glass half empty...is always a sad and pathetic character and is never destined to be happy finding no peace and contentment in any of her ‘incarnations’”(Safadi 35). And it is because of this, that in the destitute home (Sevasadan) she finds “the respect born out of service even to the point of glowing articles about her in the newspaper, but ... not... the happiness born out of contentment.” (Safadi 35)

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