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## Through the Cathartic lens: A Study of Fallen Woman in Munshi Premchand's *Sevasadan* and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Patita Pankajam*

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### **Abstract:**

Needless to say, society sets norms and rules which its members have to adhere to. It has also set up mechanisms to deal with the anomalies that may potentially disrupt the system. Despite all the scientific and technological advancements, we survive in such a society where the needle of the watch decides the character and morality of a female. The paper attempts to vouchsafe the phases as well as the faces of a fallen woman's entity through the novels *Sevasadan* by Munshi Premchand and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Patita Pankajam*. The novels can be looked at not as an individual story but a piece of story expounding the extreme sorry state of multitudes of women. A comparative exegesis of two novels which represent the two geo-cultural regions of India namely North and South opens an avenue to closely look at the issue of prostitution and its after effects. The intended study affirms the fact that both the heroines of the concerned novels are driven to sin due to the compulsions of the society and not out of individual choice.

**Keywords:** Progressive movement, realism, prostitution, fallen woman, social norms.

The selected novelists as well as the literary stalwarts Munshi Premchand and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai are the pioneers of proletarian movement in Hindi and Malayalam literature respectively. Theirs was a determined effort to bring forth a new form of fiction for a revaluation of values, especially social values in conformity with the needs of the time and the urges of the people. Marxism helped them analyse the basic structure of their society. Freudian Psychology enabled them to delve deep into the inner chambers of the human psyche. Among the many novelists, they are two of the most outstanding novelists of the contemporary Indian literary scene. It is widely acclaimed that they are trend setters and champions in making the novel a powerful instrument of social transformation. The emergence of novel is more or less a social phenomenon than a natural one as a genre of literature. Society enters into history and vice versa with the novel. Their fiction has striking similarities and in many aspects they are most closely comparable to the 20<sup>th</sup> century novelists of India. The affinity of temperament is also similar in their writings. They raised their voice against the human atrocities and depicted the lives of the

common people as the way they are, albeit it lacked the pomp and splendor of the high class society in ivory towers and sky scrapers. They began writing about common people in common language easily comprehensible to them. Hence they tried to reflect and refract the real happenings of life using pen as their weapon. As our country envisages 'unity in diversity', it's ordinarily visible in the situations and circumstances in the life of people from northern and southern parts of India. This is lucidly brought out by these writers in their creative outputs in the midst of regional nuances, through depiction and usage of traditional myths, taboos and cultural ethos.

Munshi Premchand, known by the sobriquet 'the emperor of the novelists' (upanyas samrat), is the fore runner of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction. He lived in a period that witnessed many tremendous changes in Indian society that had an impact in the formation of his character and personality. The socio political events like foundation of Arya Samaj and personalities like Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi influenced the making of his intellectual and emotional standards. After his mother's bereavement, life seemed so hard to him. His own bitter experiences, widow hood of his stepmother, his own unhappy marriage made him a staunch believer and follower of Arya Samaj. He had been groping in the dark to find his inner queries and Arya Samaj rendered him relief. Swadeshi movement and the revolutionary terrorist movement as well had an abiding influence on him. What made him attracted to Gandhiji was his treatment of the poor and his focus on peasantry. He pointed out that the writer's quest through his writings is to end the oppressive social condition so that the world becomes a better place to live. He holds the notion that a writer could bring enlightenment in the society and he could do it by depicting the society truthfully. A novelist according to him portrays his age faithfully. Balzac of France, George Eliot of England and Dean Howells of America materialized the art of realism in writing as a reaction against romanticism. Munshi Premchand is the first Hindi author to introduce realism in his works. He wrote "a realistic writer presents the characters in their real, naked form to the readers. A realist writer is enchained in the shackles of experience. Since there is domain of evil characters in the world and even in most resplendent character, there is some blemish. Therefore realism is the naked portrayal of our weaknesses, cruelties and hatred". He believed that words must not be forced out of the character's mouth but must be spoken naturally. His themes comprise agrarian life, corruption, child widowhood, feudal system, colonization, exploitation of women and peasants, issues related to industrialisation, inter personal relationships and political scenario of the times. Born out of the socio-political realities of his time and his personal odyssey to seek explanation for human predicament, Premchand's fiction astutely maps the contemporary cultural dimensions of North India. The novel *Sevasadan* brings to limelight the evil consequences of a system that breeds a middle class which makes a show of a standard that it is unable to maintain without accepting illegal gratification. In the novel, which seems to have been completed before the end of 1917, he dealt with the issue of moral degradation symbolized by the 'red light street' institutions.

*Sevasadan* is the foremost novel by Premchand in which the novelist has raised the issues concerning women in the Indian society dovetailed with the social issues comprising custom of dowry, mismatched marriage and prostitution. His basic preoccupation has been the reformation and rehabilitation of the prostitutes in the society. The inability of Daroga Krishnachandra, an honest police-officer and the father of Suman to manage a good dowry for his daughter, leads to her mismatched marriage with Gajadhar, a thirty years old clerk earning a meager salary of fifteen rupees per month. Suman, the protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of a village sub-inspector and she has been brought up in a somewhat well-off family. Krishnachandra, her father, is known as an extremely fair police officer, impossible to bribe. Faced with the requirements of a dowry for his daughter's wedding, he puts his honesty of twenty-five years in cold storage and accepts a bribe which results in his conviction to five years' imprisonment and the expenditure of all his savings on his defense. The sentence is passed at a time when his family has little left for the marriage of his two daughters, Suman and Shanta, both brought up in luxury and unaccustomed to household work. While Krishnachandra is in prison, his wife's brother comes to the aid of the family. Through his help, Suman is married to Gajadhar Prasad. Suman's marriage to Gajadhar is like the companionship of an 'Arab horse with a pack mule.' Gajadhar cannot afford to engage servants. Suman has, therefore, to do all the household chores. This is a life she does not relish. Vivacious, ambitious, accustomed to easy living, she feels unhappy and wants her husband to earn more. Somehow or the other, she envies the life of Bholi, a prostitute who lives in the house opposite Suman's. Bholi eats well, dresses well and is honoured by the elite of the town. However, when Bholi attempts to lure Suman, the latter considers it below her dignity even to talk to her. Soon, however, Suman comes to know that it is not correct for her to look down upon Bholi.

“It was one thing when Suman believed that only wealth bowed at its head at Bholi's feet; but now Suman realized that religion had become her devotee as well. Even the most religious men respected her- I had hoped to beat that courtesan with religion and piety, but look at her. She is the epitome of respect and honour in god's home, in this assembly of great men, and yet there is n't even a place for me to sit anywhere in this temple.” (*Sevasadan* 23)

Suman sees that the 'pillars of religion' also pay court to her neighbour, Bholi, who is respected and gets full attention from the priests in the temple where Suman is ignored. Suman realizes that Bholi bai is much coveted by the upper-caste, upper class elite of Hindu society. Bholi bai's *thumri* [semi-classical romantic song] merely reinforces Suman's decision because its romantic content, which would usually meet with disapproval, is lauded by the respectable elite gathered at lawyer Padamsingh's house.

“Ah the flames of Holi burn inside me,  
My love is gone,  
I wait at the door,  
How can I find the strength to be calm?

The flames of Holi burn inside me” (*Sevasadan* 32).

Suman was captivated by Bholi bai's performance. Many thoughts and queries started triggering her mind leading to an utter imbroglio.

“Suman sat there for a long time deliberating over the cause and effect of these things. In the end, she concluded- she is free; there are shackles on my feet .Her warehouse is open, that's why there is a crowd of customers; mine is closed, that's why no one is standing in line. 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 the purdah , while I am cloistered in it. She can swing freely on branches, while I have to hang on for dear life. This shame and this fear of derision have made me the servant of others” ( *Sevasadan* 33)

The rest of the story, more or less, hinges on the life of Suman, who life is shattered due to mutual misunderstanding. Late in returning home one day from a musical concert at Padamsingh's house, Suman is turned out of the house by Gajanand. A derelict Suman is left with no choice but to live a life of sin. She becomes a courtesan. Despite the endeavours from both sides differences soon crop up, their marriage culminates on the rocks and with the consequence Suman ending up into prostitution. Vitthaldas, a zealous social reformer, meets Suman and urges her to give up the sinful profession and begin a dignified life but fails to specify precisely the dignified occupation. Suman exposes the hollowness and the hypocrisy of the society that pushes innocent women to this profession. Suman renders an exquisite reply when Vitthaldas criticised her with the sole responsibility of shaming the entire Hindu race.

“Suman responded calmly- You might think so, but no one else shares your opinion. Just a while ago several gentlemen came to hear me sing. They were all Hindus. And yet none of them seemed embarrassed to be here. They were delighted to see me. Besides, I am not only the Brahmin woman in this part of the town. I can tell you the names of a few others who are also from a high caste. They, too, were forced to come here when they couldn't find a way to survive in the Hindu community. When the Hindu race itself has no shame, how can members of the fairer sex like me defend it?” ( *Sevasadan* 70)

The efforts of reformers like Padam Singh, who feels remorseful for having forced Suman to leave his house, and Vitthaldas, a widow's home is started in Banaras shouldn't be left unmentioned. Ultimately she gives up this sinful life and joins a vidhwa-ashram, an institution supported by several donors and social reformers. As Kumwar Anirudhsingh, who is Premchand's mouthpiece, says: "We have no right to look down upon prostitutes as fallen creatures. It is the height of our own shamefacedness. Day in and day out, we accept bribes, receive interest at exorbitant rates, .suck the blood of the poor and cut the throat of the helpless. Surely, we are the most fallen, the greatest sinners, the most evilly disposed and unjust. We, who think ourselves to be educated, civilised, cultured, enlightened and 'of the classes,' have no right, no justification whatsoever to look down upon any stratum of society. In a society which puts a

premium on, and honours and respects the tyrannical landlord, the corrupt official, the cantankerous moneylender, the selfish relatives and friends, Dal Mandi is bound to prosper. And why shouldn't it? How else could the ill-gotten money be spent, save in questionable channels? The day the system of bribes, rich gifts and compound interests, ceases to exist, Dal Mandi would be deserted, and these sparrows will fly away. But not till then."(*Sevasadan*, 206)

Though Suman accepts a dignified life the stigma of her past sticks to her entity. Thus, the marriage of her sister Shanta fails to solemnize as her past is revealed to her in-laws. On Shanta's arrival at the *ashram*, Suman is overcome with shame and disgust at herself:

“I am a sinner, cursed, a whore. You are a goddess, a saint. Don't let yourself be Pollute. I am a sinner, cursed, a whore. You are a goddess, a saint. Don't let yourself be polluted by me. Lust, desire and sin have sullied this heart. Don't bring your bright and true spirit near me. Run away from here. The fires into the gates of hell are burning before me, and the messenger of death is dragging me into that fire.” (*Sevasadan*, 205).

Meanwhile, Gajadhar realises his mistake, dons the holy robes, takes on the name of Swami Gajanand and moves about in Banaras and the neighbourhood. Suman feels that her ignominy has been the real cause not only of her father's death but also of her sister's misfortunes. She succeeds in giving her sister's hand off to Sadan Singh, who once loved her. Sadan Singh and Shanta live as husband and wife and get a son. Suman, however, feels ignored in the house (which is no longer visited by the neighbours-also because they do not wish to associate themselves with Suman). Sadan Singh feels he cannot really allow a woman who was once a prostitute to stay with him, even though she be his sister-in-law. But he cannot tell her to get out. When, however, his parents come to visit him, Suman leaves Shanta's house-for the wilderness. She treks through a dense forest and does not know where she is. Her feet are sore. Out of sheer exhaustion she faints and falls down. She has a reverie and is drawn to a cottage where she meets Swami Gajanand himself. She confesses that her desires were the sole cause of all the misfortunes of the family. She asks him to forgive her. The swami tells her that the true path of virtue is the path of service. He prevails upon Suman to take charge of *Sevasadan*, a rescue home for the daughters of prostitutes. Suman's marginalization enables her spiritual evolution, and the *ashram* represents the zenith of her spiritual journey. Suman's spiritual evolution means that she is finally able to look beyond the circumstances of her own life to reach out to other unfortunate young women. Her spiritual evolution then leads her to educate the young women under her care in cooking, sewing and housekeeping in the hope that they will someday embody the ideal of the Hindu wife that she never could embody herself. In addition to living a life of *seva*, she also teaches the young women under her care about the virtues of a life dedicated to *seva*. This is made explicit when the young women sing a *bhajan* [devotional song] about their desire to embody *seva*:

“O father of the universe, O lord of the universe  
Give me your love and affection  
Let my mind be focused on your devotion  
Help me forget my attachment to sensual enjoyment  
In this song, the frame of devotion moves away from man towards god” (*Sevasadan* 270)

Thakazhi is widely recognized as the writer who gave voice to the peasant life of Travancore. He was influenced by the Marxian ideology and Freudian theory and actively participated in the Writer's Movement and the literary circle led by Kesari Balakrishnapillai. He entered into the Malayalam literary field shocking the refined attitude of the elite class. He announced to the outer world of India that there exists such a language known as Malayalam and its literature. Along with him, P.Keshava Dev, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, S.K.Pottekkat and P.C.Kuttikrishnan constituted the pentagon that created the mighty verbal edifice which is known as the Renaissance novel in Malayalam. Like William Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" or R.K.Narayan's "Malgudi", Kuttanad is the locale of Thakazhi and thirty six of his novels are centered on Kuttanad and its contingency. Being a member of agrarian family, it aroused his spirit to know the life of farmers and depict as it is in raw form with flesh and blood characters. He belongs to the Thakazhi village of Kuttanad Thaluk and his domain is the complex world comprising the miseries and hardships of the coolie workers, scavengers, and middle class multitudes of the region of Kuttanad. It is an amazing geographical region on the banks of river Pamba manifesting the natural beauty of Kerala. Known by the sobriquet "rice granary of Kerala", the lives of people hailing from Kuttanad is vested in the farmlands and paddy fields. Right from the regime of Kings and landlords, it remained as a thing apart from all other regions of Kerala even in its social relationships. "Paraiyahs" and "Pulayas", the low castes by birth constitute the majority of Kuttanad. They were literally the slaves of Janmis (landlords). The farmers found delight in their strenuous toil in the field by singing Nadanpattu, Krishipattu and they made their occasions festive and indefatigable. The Progressive Literature Movement that gathered new momentum in the North under the leadership of Munshi Premchand and Harindranath Chattopadhyay exercised its sway on the Kerala writers infused with revolutionary zeal. They were provided the intellectual leadership they need by two scholar critics Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and M.P.Paul. Like Premchand, Thakazhi brought realism to Malayalam fiction in his own way and championed the cause of the insulted and humiliated segment of a specific regional community with profound sympathy. He saw the scary sides of life and portrayed them widely. Although realism lacked the pomp and hubbubs of the elite strata of society and ivory towers, he exhibited his presence as an artist who is in love with the poor and who hates those who exploit them. His major themes in novels consist of caste segregation, feudal and bureaucratic system, and connection with Hinduism, exploitation of women and lower castes, man woman relationship and political temper of the times. In *Patita Pankajam*, Thakazhi delineated the life of a young girl who became a prostitute under the thrust of context. In its foreward, E.V. Krishnapillai, an illustrious writer of that period wrote "we see in this beautiful

work the naked figure of human greatness that piteously cries out under the fangs of atrocious evil, which as is said somewhere in this book, God himself has created. This picture gallery has been made attractive by endowing emotions which are otherwise vague with concrete shape”

The heroine Gunavathi of *Patita Pankajam* is a woman of benevolent nature and is attributed with very fine qualities. She has been forced into prostitution by a cruel greedy man named Rathishan. Gunavathi sincerely intends to come out of that hell and earnestly wishes to lead an honourable life. This disgraceful life of a prostitute hurts her self- respect. She is well aware of the fact that it is a thankless job. The men approach her only when they require sexual pleasure; they keep their visit a secret because they are afraid of the society. But their wives come to her only to curse her just because they are of the conviction that she is the sole reason for the disharmony in their marital lives. If she goes out for a walk, people do not talk to her, but simply point at her, whispering among them that she is a prostitute. Thakazhi recounts the way she ponders over her execrable life.

“She once again fell into thinking about the hellish experiences of her life. She was a prostitute. She felt that it was foolish on her part to consider her life as a private one because there was no secret in her life at all. Everything was kept open. She thought that she had become despicable because of this only. The vast sea in front of her was very safely keeping its deeper most secrets within its tomb. That was how it had been able to retain its dignity. But, a harlot? The memories of her sad experiences now began to stand before her clearly one by one. She has danced half – naked. For satisfying the customer, she had thrown away her hesitation and shyness. She had revealed and shown all that she had inherited. The world had spat on her. In what other ways can it evaluate her rotten life, trespassing the limits of morality? What kind of a reward she would receive other than this?

The customer is an inquisitive person. He will forcefully pull out that deformed, disfigured soul, who is the victim of his cruelty, from the dark to the light. After that he would be studying her-cutting, analyzing, and observing. In this way all his cruelty will be overturned with a boisterous laughter on the wretched soul lying down before him. Prostitute! Her life is a failure. Success of life lies on the amount of secrets you keep. Does the prostitute have secrets? Well, all her experiences take place at midnight. But, will it be swallowed and covered in that silence? Last night’s customer might tell tomorrow’s customer everything in detail. Prostitute! She does not have a night. Open door, open life, open heart – all are bright and clear as daylight.

Why does the prostitute wear fine clothes? – Why does she wear clothes at all? Gunavathi felt that she was naked. She began to cry?” (*Patita Pankajam* 21-22)

These thoughts of Gunavathi are enough to tell us how thin-skinned she is. She tries her best to convince Vinayan about her ardent desire to become his wife. The very query of Gunavathi underlines this certitude.

“What is the name for our relationship?



Vinayan was dumbstruck.

How can you love a lady who is not related you by marital bonds or blood ties? She asked.”(*Patita Pankajam* 41)

Vinayan has made up his mind to be her savior. At the end, they plan to run away. Gunavathi is not a prototypical woman. She wants neither money nor ornaments. That is why, in order to get rid of Rathishan, she gives away all her ornaments to him. But her plans do not materialize at all and everything turns topsy-turvy. But Gunavathi, despite being prostitute, comes out at the end as a pure, immaculate soul. In naming her only, Thakazhi has tried to deconstruct the very semantics of the belief that a prostitute is immoral.

The names of the heroines also bear some striking resemblance apart from their delineation of sagas. The very name Gunavathi alludes a lady with virtuous persona. The name Suman connotes someone with a good heart or mind. Munshi Premchand and Thakazhi deserve mention here as they have tried to give of touch of sanctity by coining these names to their fallen heroines. Our society is too harsh on women if she breaks stereotypes. Albeit Suman and Gunavathi come back to their beaten tracks of so called decent life, people find hard to accept them. It is their circumstances that prompted them to be immoral. A man can be flirtatious with a woman. When a woman exhibits similar behavior, she is branded as a whore. She is considered as a slut too. Terms, rules and condition differ for men and women in our nation. They are flexible according to the powerful men of the society. A lifetime's reputation can be lost by an instant or an instance. This befalls in the life of an ordinary human being and *Sevasadan* and *Patita Pankajam* emphasise on this actuality. The plight of a woman is same everywhere despite all the man made barriers, geographical differences and distances. *Sevasadan* and *Patita Pankajam* serve as a testimony for this truth.

Both Thakazhi and Munshi Premchand had a strong aversion for the social institution which causes cleavage between the different strata in the social structure. They believed their creative endeavors could be an effective instrument for social transformation. They uphold human dignity and assert that these wretches are also human. They humanize these wretches giving those feelings, mind, heart and soul. They exhorted the need of a social revolution in order to get rid of the socio political malaise. These writers deserve significance and relevance even in the present days as they paved a new way far away from the oft beaten tracks and exposed the dignity of labour and highlighted work as worship. They inaugurate a new epoch in Hindi Literature and Malayalam literature respectively. For them, society was the court of law where they plead their case. They tried to bring to limelight the real face of bourgeois democracy, man's insatiable and inordinate avarice for women, wealth and wine engendered and promoted by capitalism. Karl Marx once said “I experience the inevitability of the existence of whomsoever I love”. Premchand and Thakazhi loved the peasants, and they both experienced the “inevitability” of their existence. They explored the root causes of their situations and anxieties, and exposed those

social, political and cultural forces, thoughts and values which were dangerous to the life of hapless. Both the novels hint on the dire reality that male instincts of sexual euphoria cannot be resolved.

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