



## NO COUNTRY FOR WOMEN: AN APPRAISAL OF MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S SEVASADAN AND NIRMALA

**Aparna Ajith.**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Rajasthan,  
Kishangarh, Email id-[ajithaparnakv4@gmail.com](mailto:ajithaparnakv4@gmail.com)

### 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 wretched woman's entity through the novels *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala* by Munshi Premchand. 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 facets of women opens an avenue to closely look at the tragic issues of dowry system, mismatched marriage, prostitution and its after-effects. The intended study affirms the fact that both the heroines of the concerned novels are driven to their ordained plight due to the compulsions of the society and not out of individual choice.

**Keywords:** Realism, Progressive Movement, marriage, social norms, phases of women



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The selected novelist as well as the literary stalwart Munshi Premchand is the pioneer of proletarian movement in Hindi literature. His 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 him analyse the basic structure of the society. Freudian Psychology enabled him to delve deep into the inner chambers of the human psyche. Among the many novelists, Premchand is one of the most outstanding novelists of the contemporary Indian literary scene. It is widely acclaimed that he is the trendsetter and champion in making the novel a powerful instrument of social transformation. The emergence of the 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. He raised his voice against the human atrocities and depicted the lives of the common people as the way they are, albeit it lacked the pomp and splendour of the high-class society in ivory towers and skyscrapers. He began writing about common people in common language easily comprehensible to them. Hence, he tried to reflect and refract the real happenings of life

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using pen as his weapon. As our country envisages 'unity in diversity', it's ordinarily visible in the situations and circumstances in the life of people from his characters of northern India. This is lucidly brought out by the writers in his creative outputs in the midst of regional nuances through depiction and usage of social norms, traditional myths, taboos and cultural ethos.

Munshi Premchand, known by the sobriquet 'the emperor of the novelists' (upanyas samrat), is the forerunner of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction. He lived in a period that witnessed many tremendous changes in Indian society that had an impact on the formation of his character and personality. The socio-political events like the 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, widowhood 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 the 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 the 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, the feudal system, colonization, exploitation of women and peasants, issues related to industrialisation, interpersonal relationships and political scenario of the times. Born out of the socio-political realities of his time and his personal odyssey to seek an 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 meagre 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. ( Premchand 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 (Premchand 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. ( Premchand 33)

The rest of the story, more or less, hinges on the life of Suman, whose 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?  
( Premchand 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."( Premchand 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. (Premchand 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. (Premchand 270)

*Nirmala*, first published in 1928 is a moving tale of a fifteen- year- old girl whose life is bartered by the very hands of destiny when she is made to marry an elderly widower – a matchless match. Premchand presents a nuanced mockery of the institution of marriage and that of the patriarchal society with a high degree of reformist outline. The novel *Nirmala* revolves around the life and activities of the eponymous heroine. Nirmala as the protagonist as well as the victim leaves some sensitive issues with an undying reverberation in the psyche of readers. It documents a transition that was occurring in the earlier part of the 1900's and is an introduction to the history of women's rights and the status of women in Indian culture. In fact, this novel is a moving saga of a Nirmala who is married to an aged widower with many children. Suspected of infidelity by her husband, she has to undergo a lot of mental torture. The action of the novel centres around three families in which Nirmala is the common link. The central character named Nirmala is the common link between these families. The novelist has brought to limelight the social evils like dowry system and mismatched marriage in which the young Nirmala is consistently a victim.

Nirmala is the daughter of Babu Udayabhanulal, a successful and wealthy lawyer. Apart from Nirmala, he has three other children, a daughter Krishna, a son Chanderbhanu and the youngest son Suryabhanu. As was customary he is on the lookout for a suitable match for Nirmala and he eventually finds a suitable groom whose family doesn't require any dowry. This causes considerable relief to the father but the daughter, Nirmala, becomes quiet and

withdrawn after the announcement of her marriage. Krishna and Nirmala have the following conversation:

Krishna- Will I too be turned out this way one day?

Nirmala- So do you expect to stay here forever? We are girls, we don't really belong anywhere.

Krishna- Will Chander too be turned out?

Nirmala- Chander is a boy. Who will turn him out?

Krishna- Are girls very bad then?

Nirmala- If they weren't bad, would they be thrown out like this? ( Premchand 3)

Due to unanticipated circumstances, Nirmala finally marries Munshi Totaram, an aged pleader on the wrong side of forty. He, however, was like a father to her in age, in constitution and in

mental development. She could not reconcile herself to the position now thrust on her. She could attend on him, worship him, respect him, but could not do the one thing he asked her to do -to love him. Nirmala naturally found him physically distasteful and did not enjoy any kind of closeness with her husband. Totaram, on the other hand, tried his best to win the affection of his new bride. To her utter dismay, Nirmala found it impossible to respond favourably to his overtures. But Totaram was so mesmerised with the elegant Nirmala, that he made her the treasurer of his household. Totaram had three sons from his first wife. The eldest son, Mansaram, was sixteen years old, Jiyaram was twelve years old and the youngest was seven-year-old Siyaram. Totaram's sister, Rukmini, a fifty-year-old widow too lived with them. Before Nirmala's arrival in the house, Rukmini looked after the entire household. Rukmini was envious of Nirmala's pre-eminence in the house and this was the cause of constant strife.

Mansaram was young, intelligent and good looking. Being of her age, Nirmala felt some intellectual affinity towards him. She liked him and felt happy when he sat by her side. She treated Mansaram as a good mother would. On learning, however, that Nirmala took lessons in English from Mansaram, Totaram packed him off to the school boarding house. Nirmala's efforts to remove the misunderstanding served only to make it deeper. Once when Mansaram



lay on deathbed, Nirmala, like a loving mother, went to the hospital. But the father would not bring his son home. Fortunately, before Mansaram closed his eyes, he fell on her feet, paid a warm tribute to her motherly love and, incidentally, clarified the position for Totaram who now felt ashamed of himself. But it was too late; his son had gone. And Nirmala soon gave birth to a daughter. The shock of his son's death was too great for Totaram. His practice declined.

Nirmala returns home and as is usual is blamed for the death of her stepson Mansaram. People also began to poison Jiyaram and Siyaram's ears against Nirmala. Nirmala began to economise on the milk and fruit that was bought because of the strained circumstances but this was construed as depriving her stepsons of food. Eventually, Jiyaram steals some of Nirmala's jewellery and Nirmala sees him stealthily leaving her room. The police officers are called and enquiries are made, but again Nirmala remains silent. This silence backfires as he instead upbraids her. He says, "You were concerned about preserving your own image but gave no thought to the consequences that would follow." (Premchand 161) Finally, afraid of getting caught, Jiyaram commits suicide. Nirmala would take care that every penny that was spent was put only to the right use. Siyaram, now Totaram's only living son, had to do all the shopping, and he was cross-examined about every pie which passed through his hands. Fed up with this life, he fled to Haridwar with a *sadhu*. Followed Totaram to bring him back and there lay Nirmala, grief-stricken, bedridden, uncared for and unattended to. She lay there on the bed for news from her husband, which did not come till her deliverance from her life of woes.

Totaram loses all his three sons. Two to death and the third one becomes a *sadhu* and leaves home. He became old and haggard and also failed miserably at work. When he returns after a futile search for Siyaram, Nirmala is waiting for him anxiously. When she asks him whether he is unable to control his fury:

Get out of my sight or I won't be answerable for what I do! All this is your doing. It is entirely because of you that I've been reduced to this condition. Was this the state of my home six years ago? You've destroyed my well-established home, uprooted my flourishing garden. I didn't bring you into this house to have my whole world

destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. And this is the price I am paying. (Premchand 181)

Munshi Totaram leaves home to look for his son leaving Nirmala, her daughter and his sister Rukmini behind. Her soft speech was replaced by harsh words and invective. Under these circumstances, her friend Sudha became her confidante. But even this friendship comes to a naught when Dr. Sinha (Sudha's husband) makes a pass at her on finding her alone in his house one day. This was the last blow to her miserable existence and Nirmala could not survive the loss of her friend. She contracts fever and dies. She lived a wretched life and died a wretched death. In the end, Premchand emotionally depicts:

On the fourth day, at sunset, her sad story came to an end. Nirmala's soul, having endured a lifetime of the darts and arrows of clever huntsmen and the claws of clever predators, and having been buffeted mercilessly by gusts of wind till it could endure no more, flew off to its eternal home. (Premchand 196)

Premchand's Nirmala has suffered unfathomably until she reached the 'undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.' He himself wrote to a friend that the book wasn't a great work of literature or art. It only 'exposed a social evil,' namely, the evil consequences of an aged widower with several children, marrying a girl young enough to be his daughter. (Gopal 251)

Munshi Premchand had a strong aversion to the social institution which causes cleavage between the different strata in the social structure. He firmly believed that his creative endeavours could be an effective instrument for social transformation. He upholds human dignity and asserts that these wretches are also human. They humanize these pathetic women giving those feelings, mind, heart and soul. Premchand exhorts the need for a social revolution in order to get rid of the socio-political malaise of dowry system and mismatched marriage. Suman and Nirmala leave an indelible impression of women bereft of a country in the mindsets of readers. They transcend all the manmade boundaries of geographical differences and distances as every woman yearns for a room of her own. *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala* exemplify the tragic predicament of women (forceful/ feeble) in all its sense and essence.

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