



Courtesan as Resistance to the National and the Colonial: A Study of SevaSadan

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Abstract:

Premchand's SevaSadan has been read as a powerful critique on the treatment of the courtesan culture in Indian society. The discourse of courtesan as a threat to the masculine/national/colonial is emphatically conveyed vis-a-vis Suman, who becomes the embodiment of both home and the world. The paper aims to study both nationalism and colonialism as hegemonic structures that attempt to push the courtesan to the "feminine" space. The paper examines the courtesan's body as a constant space of negotiation and trial, which both liberates as well as confines her. Also, since SevaSadan is a thorough case of translation, it thus allows us to interrogate the reception of the courtesan in various cultures (via its translations).

Keywords:

courtesan culture; colonialism; nationalism
masculine; feminine; translation

Perceiving nationhood as a woman is historical as well as psychological habit concocted by both nationalism and colonialism. Nationalism being an imitative category of colonialism behaves like a hegemonic structure that fixes nationhood as a feminine figure, thereby associating it with honor and pride. Also, the conception of the nation as a chaste mother has been a subject of constant debate in literary history, especially during colonialism when the nation (here British India) was robbed off its honor as well as wealth. Within the discourse of

nation as a woman, the figure of the courtesan, then, has been seen as a subversive, transgressive force, denying the masculine sentiment (of protection of nationalistic pride) that nationalism holds. The courtesan, despite having a strong cultural significance, is a misfit in the traditional, clearly defined hierarchical, masculine pattern. However, the courtesan's presence amidst the center of the city in Premchand's *Sevasadan* is representational of their position and status within conventions, at the same time, acts as both temptation and caution for the staunch believers of customs. The courtesan culture can be studied as a (sub)counter-nationalism, for the courtesan's temptation is threatening to the grand, militaristic values of nationalism that prescribes tough values of control on impulses and protection of the mother nation.

The purpose of this study involves the reading of the courtesan as a symbol of not only counter-nationalism, also the way it works as an anti-colonial agent. Both nationalism and colonialism share a symbiotic bond, work together to destroy the rhetoric of nation. Nationalism is a product of strong national sentiments prescribed by ethno-cultural boundaries that creates a masculine narrative of martial strength; while colonialism crushes the manly pride a nation has in protecting their mother earth. The notion of nationalism and gender can be paralleled with Partha Chatterjee's argument (Chatterjee 624) on the spiritual or the inner world as feminine and the material or the outer as the masculine.



However, the courtesan seems to work against Chatterjee's recommendation of not losing the essence of the feminine, inner principle of domesticity. The courtesan, then, becomes the Other to both the nationalistic as well as the colonial projects. The courtesan, nonetheless, can be viewed as both traditional and liberal, while rejecting all associations, and emerging out as a subculture. This paper is divided into four parts; first, it seeks to understand the way the nation's boundary is envisaged through a woman's body, especially that of the courtesan, through Premchand's *Sevasadan*. Suman, the woman in transition, stands for the Indian woman who juggles between the private and the public spaces. Premchand's projection of the woman struggling in both the spaces gain a new dimension when Suman, the depressed, unsatisfied wife twists her fortune and becomes popular in *Bazar-e-husn*. Second, the paper attempts to interrogate the figure of the courtesan as a threat to the masculine, national mainstream. *Sevasadan* is an appropriate space to study the trope of woman's subversion through Suman's temptation of becoming a courtesan. Being a courtesan, she realizes she is more liberated and free from all the conventions otherwise imposed on her. The courtesan, then, becomes a paradigmatic space to understand the resistance to the colonial as well as the national enterprise. Third, this examines the journey from *Bazar-e-husn* to *Sevasadan*; the text has traveled across these two polar languages (especially post partition) that has pushed it into the realm of politics. Also, it gives us an insight into the reception of the courtesan culture by the Hindi and the Urdu culture. The text faced problems as *Bazar-e-husn*, thus Premchand translated it in Hindi; *Sevasadan* soon became popular as Hindi fiction. The translation, therefore, is problematic for the novel that essentially deals with the courtesan culture that has its own political ramifications. Fourth, Premchand introduces a then emergent religious sect i.e. Arya Samaj that opens up a debate of the role of religion in nationalism; it

also responds to the way religion acts as a catalyst in trashing the courtesan culture altogether. The notion of religion being pricked even at the sight of the courtesans make religion a part of the colonial, masculine and national project.

Suman as the Nation

As we are aware of Premchand's neat and detailed characterization, the character of Suman depicts the predicament of a woman who leaves behind her marital home, falls for the charms and pleasures of a courtesan, finally turning herself into a saint. The courtesan one encounters in Suman is not a deliberate one; becoming a courtesan happens to her. However, Bholi, the most desired courtesan in the bazaar (before Suman became Sumanbai), is a courtesan by her choice; she in fact seems to love what she does. Not at one instance in the novel she expresses any desire to get married or become a mother; whereas Suman is not satisfied with herself. She competes herself with Bholi for she wants to be liberated as Bholi.

[...] she is free; there are shackles on my feet. Her warehouse is open, that's why 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'm 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 servant of others. (pp 60)

Premchand's brilliance in creating these two polar characters in different yet similar places is suggestive that these two women are two sides of the same coin. While both Suman and Bholi are courtesans, the two hail from different backgrounds, have separate aspirations. Nonetheless, both of these deny what is recommended to them, they are rebels in their own ways. Even though it is Bholi who represents the notion of a perfect courtesan, it is



in Suman one sees the blurring between the public and the private. (Dalmia vi)

The dilemma of Suman between the public and the private echoes Bimala's predicament in Tagore's *The Home and The World*. Bimala being the woman of the zamindar clan is associated with a noble cause of nationalism, whereas Suman here is the wife of a poor Gajadhar, her stepping out is closely linked with her economic status. This comparison is only validated while comparing the two women in their respective spaces. Both the women, nonetheless, can be read as symbols of the nation in their respective times; also, for both, it is the outside that is liberated. These arguments make us re-think the notion of envisaging the nation as a woman. In *Sevasadan*, Premchand, is making a remark that caste alone is not a part of nationalism, it is also what can be bought and sold.

Courtesans as threat to National Imagination

Repeatedly through the novel, values of shame, honor, and respect are evoked in regard to Suman's transition to Sumanbai in Dalmandi. The paradox becomes even sharper when people raise fingers at her for she is a Brahmin woman and that she ought to remain within her boundaries. Premchand makes a political statement when Suman, a once-wealthy, obedient Brahmin woman turns herself into a courtesan: it is a deliberate defiance of the resistances posed by both one's own society and the British. The novel being a part of colonial India reflects that a nation is after all an imagined community under the British Raj; it is not the land of its people. In the same way, the figure of Suman getting muddled into the world of courtesans gives the reader a hint to the nationalism of those days. Through Suman, Premchand hints at the pollution of the nation and its traditions at the hands of the British forces. Literally speaking, the British had started the Social Purity Movement during the 19th century that made an impact in Hindustan,

and the censor by the British had befooled the Hindus into believing that courtesans cause a moral deterioration in the society.

The courtesans were instrumental in proceeding forth the heritage of traditional and classical music. The custom of Performance was unthinkable without the *tawaifs*: these women originally started as *kalaakaars*, who entertained people. They would be experts in classical music, performed *thumris*, and were accomplished in literature. The Anti-Nautch Movement during the 19th century, that was a result of the Social Purity Movement in England, was also one of the most significant colonial impact on the institution of *tawaifs*. (Purkyastha) As said earlier, the courtesans were not essentially associated with prostitution, they worked as the carriers of arts and music. The school of courtesans was an important center of learning wherein they would learn and teach young girls great arts and literatures. In fact, some courtesans were great maestros, however, sadly they never got the title. The courtesan, in other words, has been a public property, on rent or sale. Also, the resistance by the British sends out a crucial message of the courtesans as a threat, not only to customs and traditions but to the male ego that seeks to colonize and rule. As Chatterjee rightly argues,

[...] nationalism was not simply about a political struggle for power; it related the question of political independence of the nation to virtually every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people. In every case, there was a problem of selecting what to take from the West and what to reject [...] (Chatterjee 651)

The problem of the selection becomes an important idea of nationalism; the British carried out resistance to the courtesan culture in order to edify or purify the Hindu community, but it depended on the Hindus to make a 'moral' choice prescribed by the colonial power to actually ban these sinful *kothas* or to go along with their traditional practices. Aniruddh Singh in *Sevasadan* represents the spirit of resisting



these modernizing, civilizing regimes influenced by the British. The novel belongs to an era of pre-independence and high colonialism; the notion of nationalism is prominently present. To add to this, it was a time when Benares was undergoing immense changes at the social level that renders the text a peculiar nationalistic flavor in a local manner; it is brimmed with political debates between discrepancy in thoughts in Hindus and Muslims. Premchand's choice of the holy space (Benares) to articulate an 'unholy' transformation is an interesting way to understand the contradictory air that the city experienced during the time. (Shingavi 154)

Translation, Courtesan Culture and Reception

The concern for purifying the state by replacing the market of sex by setting up other (traditional) institutions by the Municipal Corporation shows a concrete impact of the British on the undivided Hindustan. The discussions and the subsequent opinions within the text regarding the issue was a glimpse of the way Hindus and Muslims had gradually started drifting apart holding their respective religious pride. Premchand's fictional account of the eviction of courtesans was, hence, not pure imagination; he was closely observing the changes that Benares and the whole nation at large was undergoing. The early 1900s were a time of total colonial rule and modernity had started seeping in the nation, though it was at a nascent stage. As the text reveals, it was an era when feudalism and emergent private institutions were co-existing, thus the constant flux in the ideological formations was obvious.

The debates between Hindus and Muslims within the text also brings to the mind the discourse of translation by Premchand. The politic of translating *Sevasadan* in Hindi from its earlier version *Bazar-e-Husn* in Urdu has given this text a new communal dimension. The novel, in both its Hindi and Urdu versions, has

left behind the typical *tawaif* culture of singing *ghazals* or performing *thumris*. It does, however, makes a suggestion Suman has become accomplished in *thumris* that involves intense facial and bodily expressions and has a seductive appeal that renders the courtesans to redefine their artistic identities. *Thumri* has a deep cultural significance for it employs Braj bhaasha and Khadi Boli. (Purkhyastha) Also, though *thumri* has never been acknowledged as a protest dance, but its politics comes forth with the kind of artistic autonomy it renders to its performers. Performative tradition is an important category, since performance is dialogic in nature and hence fluid. The fluidity of this tradition became obsolete by the later narrative tradition; this reading gives an insight of the transition of the courtesans from performative to narrative, from fluid to fixed, from *tawaifs* (courtesans) to *vaishyas* (prostitutes). But the absence of *thumris* in *Sevasadan* or *Bazar-e-Husn* signals the evolution of the narrative tradition as well as the problem of translation and the status of both (Hindi and Urdu) traditions in Premchand's works. Premchand has been recognized both as a fluent Urdu and a proficient Hindi writer, thereby, he has often been loosely called as anti-communal. While the novel mildly remarks on the several translations of vernacular works of art, it also suggests a remarkable shift from the Hindi tradition of writing. Yet again the notion of modernity is brought forth through the issue of problematizing the text with multiple translations. It becomes all the more apparent when the predicament of Hindi literature becomes the subject of debate amidst the discussion on the eviction of the courtesans; making it a parallel debate on modern ideas regarding the conservative and liberal views on banning the *kothas* in Dalmandi. (Shingavi 162) The translation of the text becomes further complex when Suman from being a pious, Brahmin woman turns into a *tawaif*, and later her redemption proves unworthy. It is, thus, not only the text that has traveled across languages,



the heroine's ventures are equally tainted by prejudices. The Brahmin community, in fact, Suman's own family, no longer acknowledge her as a respectable being, even after all the hardships that she undergoes. This leads us to reconsider the reception of the text as *Sevasadan* amongst the Muslim readership and *Bazar-e-Husn* amongst the Hindus, for it engages with language, culture and religion.

The novel is entwined with debates of language, especially the tussle between Hindu and Muslim cultural values, as well as the ban on the courtesan culture in Dalmandi, putting them on the margins of the city. Both the discourses are further located within the larger space of the translated novel, that stands for the otherwise simplistic understanding of Premchand's notion of secular nationalism. Broadly, there are two ways of representing nationalism; one, to show the nationalism as ideal, other is to expose nationalism as "an ideological camouflage for dominant class interests." (Chandra 604) There has been hardly any major novel or short story wherein Premchand does not deal with nationalism; his national sentiments are, though, visible everywhere but not without his skepticism. Premchand questions the notion of nationalism in his fictional depictions, reveals that it works like any other hegemonic institution.

In *Sevasadan*, it is through the issue of eviction of the courtesans from the mainstream that unveils the exclusive male opinion who represent the dominant. The loophole in Indian nationalism is also exposed through the character of Padam Singh and Vitthaldas who work towards replacing the courtesans from Dalmandi considering it as philanthropic. Throughout the episodes on the debates on replacing the courtesans, there is no participation of women at all, except for the appearance of Miss Kanti, the Doctor's daughter, who is a young girl and spends her time in learning foreign languages. But she does not participate in the 'men's' conversation;

a subtle way of representing the woman's silence (even if she is educated) in important matters. It is forces like these that the courtesans are pushed outside to the margins of the mainstream; they are not only the outside of the nationalist discourse but have lived as peripheral entities in history. The courtesans failed to be a part of nationhood; they had always lived as absent presences. In spite being the bearers of tradition, they have not been able to attain agency to join the national struggle, or share the nationalist sentiment. The question of calling nationalism as a derivative/imitative category is untangled within the nexus of a variation of power and domination. Nationalism, in this manner, becomes any dominant ideology, like colonialism, that seeks for crushing the meek minority, shoving them under the carpet in order to have a successful show of power.

Religious Nationalism

Vitthaldas in the novel plays a crucial role in exercising his religious determinism while he shelters Suman in his widow's home. Though he appears to be a shady character, Vitthaldas nonetheless is religiously as well as politically correct. He tells Suman,

You are lowering down the heads of not only the Brahmin community, but the whole Hindu community. (pp 190)

The idea of the ideal Hindu nationalism accompanied by disciplined commentary makes his social reform as a rigorous religious/nationalist ambition. For Vitthaldas, evicting the courtesans is more a matter of pride than a noble intent of saving these women's lives. Benaras saw the rise of a new religious education during this time, the Arya Samaj, that behaves in many ways like religious nationalism. To understand the concept of religious nationalism,

we need both an analysis of "tradition" that is not prejudiced by the discourse of modernity and a theory of



the impact of colonialism and orientalism that does not deny agency to the colonial subjects. (Veer 11)

In other words, religion works like an agent that renders power to exercise their autonomy even within the nexus of colonialism. Religion or social reform joins hands with nationalism, reiterates the same nationalist ethos; thereby sharing the dominant language of power. In the name of social reform, Vitthaladas fails to understand the plight of Suman, maneuvers her into believing that a woman's life should be spent in service, either in her husband's home or otherwise. In his character, one can read the way religion is a double-edged weapon: while it 'reforms' the society, becomes dominant, it is also worshipped.

Conclusion

Premchand's *Sevasadan* is an insightful document to expose the double-standard projects of nationalism and colonialism. Nationalism becomes redundant when it marginalizes a section of the society, instead of liberating it. Post 1950s, the courtesan narratives were collated with the Dalit narratives, both being incessantly sidelined. The predicament of the courtesans in the national, colonial history has been both absent as well as evasive; marginal as well as forgotten. The institution of the courtesan becomes emblematic for all repressed bunches that have contributed majorly in the construction of national-cultural entity, yet are devoid of acknowledgement or even a recognition. Rather than being a part of the Indian tradition, they have become elements of xenophobia, that positions them as the 'other' or the foreign. This state of un-belonging and restlessness is effectively conveyed through Premchand's Suman. The polemical stance of the courtesan hails from this foreignness associated with her, that ostracizes her in all times in the history of nation.

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