



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.3, September, 2018

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

Premchand's Grasp over Female Psyche as reflected in the persona of his Heroines in *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala* - A Critical Analysis

Dr. Vibha Tiwari

Assistant Professor, Dept of English
CBRG Government Girls' College
Sriganganagar (Rajasthan)

Dr. Abha Tiwari

Assistant Professor
Dept of English, TMIMT
Teerthanker Mahaveer University
Moradabad (U.P.) India

Received 25 May 2018

Revised 4 August 2018

Accepted 21 August 2018

Abstract: Suman and Nirmala, the heroines of Premchand's novels *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala*, respectively, are equally the victims of social evils like dowry and mismatched marriage, but they react to it somewhat differently. Accordingly, Suman refuses to take the dictates of the patriarchy lying down and adopts a rebellious stance. She leaves home in search of liberty, peace and self-identity, in this process of which, she first becomes a courtesan, then enters a widows' home and finally joins *Sevasadan*, an orphanage run by her own ex- husband for the rehabilitation of the children of the prostitutes, but peace and contentment always elude her. On the contrary, Nirmala, who never feels comfortable with her aged husband, accepts her lot meekly, treating the same as *fait accompli*. Even though her husband suspects her fidelity, insinuates her of indulging in immoral relations with her own stepson and holds her guilty of ruining his home, she never ever thinks of leaving home. She endures lot of atrocities and humiliations, perpetrated by her cynical husband throughout her life and eventually meets to an ignoble end, battered and tormented. In the light of the above characterization, the present paper seeks to exemplify the incredible grasp Premchand has over women's psyche.



Keywords: Women-centric, Dowry, Mismatched marriage, Impatient, Capricious, Peace, Contentment, Traditional.

Premchand is a prolific writer of fiction, who has about a dozen novels and three hundred short stories to his credit. He also has the credit to introduce realism in fiction and to write fiction with a social purpose that serves as a medium “for expressing his social criticism and, more than that, for arousing the social conscience of the Indian people with the ultimate goal of removing those obsolete customs and beliefs which he considered to be social evils” (Orr, 1957: 32-33). His narratives seek to serve some specific purpose, and play “a role in drawing attention to the social evils of arranged and incompatible marriages, the miserable condition of women...” (Sollars, 2008: 632). He particularly aims at fighting for those who are suppressed and marginalized, and are exploited under the existing social system, might it be the exploitation of peasants by feudal lords, of poor men by moneylenders, or of women by men under the lopsided patriarchal norms. Rubin also says, “The inhumanity of caste hierarchies and the plight of women stirred his indignation and remained constant themes through his work” (Rubin, 2004: Introduction). He is always susceptible to the women’s issues, as Geetanjali Pandey says, “In his writings are taken up issues such as dowry, prostitution, widowhood, May-and-December marriages of young girls with old men, and so on.” (Pandey, 1986) Accordingly, through the women protagonists of his two well-known novels, *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala* he has raised prominently such burning women’s issues as dowry, mismatched marriage and their ugly ramifications. Although the heroines of the above novels, Suman and Nirmala, respectively, are the victims of the same social maladies, *albeit* the destiny puts them to face different challenges in life, leading them to different directions as per their whims and family conditions.

As per the story, Suman was the daughter of an honest Police Inspector, who brought her up lavishly along with her younger sister Shanta. He engaged a Christian lady to teach his two daughters at home and also gratified them by beautiful and expensive clothes and ornaments.



Nonetheless, Suman grew into a flighty and arrogant girl, who always remained discontented with her lot in life, while Shanta was innocent, quiet and polite. Comparing the traits of the two sisters, Premchand tells that “Suman expected to be treated better than those around her. If similar saris were bought for both sisters, Suman would sulk. Shanta was content with whatever came her way” (Premchand, 2005: 2). However, the harsh realities of life soon overtook Suman’s poise, shattering her comfortable life, as her father failed to find a suitable match for her, because “he had laid no money aside for the considerable sum he would be expected to expend as their dowry” (Dalmia, 2006: 31). Consequently, the frustrated police officer repented over his honesty, “Had I not been afraid of sin, I wouldn’t have to stumble upon like this” (Guru, 1967: 139). He, therefore, decided to take bribes himself in future like others of his ilk, but being naïve in the trade he was caught and imprisoned, his wife then spent all her savings trying in vain to secure his release. It brought about a swift and decisive change in Suman’s life, as her mother, who was constrained to depend on her brother Umanath for help, sent her to his place, where she was purportedly ill-treated. Nevertheless, Umanath playing the role of a guardian tried for one year to get a suitable match for her, but did not succeed, as he too had no resources enough to meet the dowry demands of the suitable parties. Eventually, the desperate maternal uncle married Suman off to Gajadhar, who was a poor widower past thirty years, but was superior in caste hierarchy, thereby 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, 2005: 13). For, he thought, “good breeding was the most desirable attribute of all” (Premchand, 2003, 11-12).

The case of Nirmala, the protagonist of Premchand’s another novel *Nirmala*, is quite similar to that of Suman with the difference that here the bridegroom’s side calls off Nirmala’s already settled marriage because of dowry. As per the story, Nirmala, the eldest of the four children of lawyer Udaybhanu Lal, was five year older than her younger sister Krishna, but temperamentally there was hardly any difference between the two, as both “were lively, playful, and mad about shows and excursions, both married off their dolls with pomp and circumstance, and both constantly shirked



their household duties... fought with their brothers, scolded the servants and as soon as they heard the sound of music in the street would rush to stand in the doorway” (Premchand, 1988: 11). Later, the marriage of Nirmala separated them, but they always remained friends and close confidants, who could discuss anything and share any secret among themselves freely and frankly. As for the marriage of Nirmala, it was settled with Bhuvanmohan, a medical student and the son of an Excise Inspector Bhalchandra Sinha, while she was only fifteen. However, amidst the marriage preparation, the lawyer had a trivial argument with his wife over the marriage expenses, following which he decided to leave home temporarily to teach his wife a lesson, thinking that “When I see that all her conceit is wiped out and her temper is cooled down I’ll come back. Four or five days should do the trick.” (20) As per the plan, he left home around the midnight, but while walking towards the Ganges, a known desperado of the area, who had an old grudge against the lawyer, followed him and inflicted a fatal blow killing him instantly. However, even after the tragic death of her husband Kalyani in her own wisdom decided to stick to the marriage schedule and sent a letter through her family priest Moteram, making a fervent appeal to Bhalchandra to honour the commitment, but he refused for fear of not getting sufficient dowry. However, his wife Rangilibai ridiculing him for his greed, took the matter before her son Bhuvanmohan, who like his father’s son refused pointblank telling her curtly, “I’ll marry anyone you arrange for me so long as it brings us lots of money...Now that the lawyer is no longer alive how much could the old woman have?” (31) Hearing it, disappointed Kalyani deputed Moteram to find out a suitable match for Nirmala, who after a few days’ survey came out with five proposals and after due consideration Nirmala was married to a well off lawyer Munshi Totaram, but who was a middle-aged widower with three sons from his first wife, the eldest of whom Mansaram was of Nirmala’s own age.

In fact, the real trouble in the lives of the two young ladies begins after their marriage, as per which Suman “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, 2006: 326). Since the pampering of her father has turned Suman into an



extravagant, she never appreciates the need of cutting her coat according to her cloth, as “her only failings are vanity and love of display, venial enough in one who has seen better days” (Sadiq, 1964: 347) Therefore, whenever her husband advises her not to be wasteful she feels sore thinking that when her neighbourly women live in style, buying new clothes and ornaments, she has to clamour for bare sustenance, which leads her to keep aloof from others, thinking herself as the most unfortunate person in the world. She also loses all her patience and turns rebellious, since “As a child, she had been taught only to please herself and enjoy life. She had not learnt the moral lesson nor acquired the religious education that plants the seeds of contentment in one’s mind.” (Premchand, 1994: 16) She even turns into a temptress, who positions herself in her room in a way that it attracts the young passersby and she does it “not out of wickedness but to show off the lustre of her beauty to win over the hearts of others.” (Premchand, 1994: 17) Besides, disregarding the wishes of her husband Gajadhar she tries to hobnob with Bholi Bai, a courtesan, who lives opposite her house “...luxuriating in the comfort of her well-lit and well-aired home and visited nightly by the town gentry” (Dalmia, 2006: 331). She is surprised to see that although prostitutes are treated as mean and depraved, Bholi commands great respect in the society, whose musical performances and religious congregations the highest gentry of the city, including the religious leaders come to attend. Her husband tries to dispel her doubts, alleging that “they are only a few, as the English education has made people liberal, who don’t hate them any longer” (cf. Guru, 1967: 142). However, it doesn’t make any sense to Suman, who continues to peep into Bholi’s house and is keen even to meet her. Gajadhar warns her sternly not to be “swayed by the *moulood* day gathering at Bholi’s place, as none of those present there was a gentleman...such people in their arrogance of being rich ignore religion” (142). However, Suman’s cravings refuse to die, as her 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, 2009: 32)



As against this, Nirmala doesn't have an obsession for a luxurious life, but her problem is to cultivate a normal conjugal relationship with her aged and lackluster husband. Although she wants to keep him in good humour, she automatically turns frigid when it comes to show warmth in relationship. She is really embarrassed whenever, her husband cast his eyes on her youthful beauty, as she feels "he did not have the proper eyes to look at it; she judged him unworthy to savour those charms. The bud blooms at the touch of the morning breeze they have the same freshness. For Nirmala that morning breeze was missing!" (Premchand, 1988: 42) Totaram being an experienced fellow and an expert in the women's psychology is able to read his wife's mind correctly, so to pacify her he makes her the in charge of the household finances in place of his sister Rukmini. Nirmala handles the charge painstakingly, keeps the account of a single penny and discusses with her husband everything about managing the household. She, however, turns indifferent when he initiates some intimate talks, as her dilemma is "Whenever she stood before the mirror, covered with jewels and richly dressed, and regarded the luminous reflection of her beauty, her heart would beat with intense longing; she would feel as though a flame were blazing inside her. She felt she would like to burn the whole house down." (42) Comparing the couple personality-wise Premchand figuratively remarks, "...one was like a splendid jewel-studded palace, the other a heap of ruins." (54) Aware of this Totaram adopts all tactics to tame his disgruntled wife and even tries to tone up his vigour consuming all sorts of nutritious foods, but "the wrinkles of his cheeks were clearly visible. His paunch, despite being belted in, pushed out like a horse that could not be restrained." (53) Nirmala, however, suppresses her emotions, as "A dashing cavalier would rather go on foot than mount a wretched mule...She yearned for a horse on which she could fly; she longed to revel in its exultant lightning speed. But for such a mount, whinnying and with his ears pricked up, she had no hope. (42-43) Nirmala feels "shy about chatting and joking with Totaram," a man of her father's age, before whom "she was accustomed to lower her gaze and conceal her body" and whom she considers "a person she ought to treat with respect rather than love" (41-42). Dejected Totaram regrets for having remarried, "I'm stuck in a rotten situation. I'd thought I could enjoy life to the full for another few years, but I've got myself into a mess." (48) As a result, rift between the couple



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

keeps widening and Totaram in sheer disgust even begins to hate his own image and has not “even the courage to look directly at Nirmala, for this matchless beauty of hers had become a sore in his heart.” (54) Nirmala notes with pity the psychological pressure on her husband and laments, “I can serve him, I can offer my life at his feet, but I can’t do what can’t be done for me: I can’t do anything about difference in our ages.” (52) Notwithstanding this, both of them feign indulgence towards each other, while Nirmala shows interest in her husband’s works and wellbeing by such placatory words, “Why have you come so late today? All the day I’ve tired myself waiting for you,” and tells him “to work only to the limit one can handle easily...I’m not greedy for more money.” (54) Totaram on his part too speaks soothing words to cajole his disgruntled wife and seizes every opportunity to show his favour for her. Nonetheless, in the hearts of both of them there is a dormant volcano, which as we shall see erupts soon in a devastating form and magnitude over Nirmala’s alleged nearness with Mansaram, her eldest stepson.

Thus, Premchand while spelling out the dominant traits of the two ladies portrays Suman as a spendthrift, who forgets about her position as the wife of a poor fellow and craves for a luxurious life at par with Bholi, a public woman, who enjoys the patronage of a lot of wealthy and high class gentry. In this way, Premchand preempts the destiny of Suman that she is ordained to remain ever restless, hankering after a new life that is more glamorous, as she always sees the grass greener on the other side. The basic flaw in her personality is that she wants to command respect and recognition everywhere she goes and when she doesn’t find it up to her expectations, she gets bored and begins to look for a better alternative. It is in this process that she walks out of her home deserting her husband, which is perhaps her most momentous decision in life. In fact, Suman is disenchanted by a few notable incidents, where she encounters Bholi being accorded a special favour by the people. The first of these incidents is the *Ramnavami* celebrations at the local temple, where Bholi sits in the centre as the star attraction of the day, at which Suman wonders, “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* (the Lord), where I find no space even to stand”



(Guru, 1967: 142). Suman is gripped with anguish, and she “stood there as if struck by a thunderbolt, her pride shattered to bits. Not only did wealth bow at Bholi’s feet, even religion sought her favour” (Dalmia, 2006: 331). The next incident is related with Beni Bagh, where the Park’s guard does not allow Suman to sit on a bench, where he seats Bholi honorably also greeting her with a bouquet of fresh flowers. Suman makes a protest against it, but the guard turns more ruthless and pushes her aside. It is, however by the timely intervention of Padam Singh, a lawyer and his wife Subhadra that the situation is saved from worsening further. Desperate for a high society, Suman befriends Subhadra, who provides her a respectable society, but it too does not prove enough for her, as she “is eaten up by her desire for nice things and her envy of people who have a higher status than she does.” (Safadi, 2009: 33) The third incident that proves decisive is Bholi’s *mujra* at Padam Singh’s place, which Suman also watches from behind the curtain along with Subhadra. Here she is overtaken by a sense of vanity and envy, as she thinks that she is prettier than Bholi, her voice is also better than that of her, and “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, 2006: 332). She, however, regrets that she is not as independent as Bholi and that it is because of the shame and public ridicule that she is subservient to others. Suman is disillusioned and she finds her husband’s plea quite hollow that men who crowd around Bholi are worthless fellows. She thinks patiently and discovers that unless she becomes a courtesan herself, she cannot get the respect and recognition that Bholi commands in the society. It is at this juncture that she decides to adopt a rebellious posture and to quit home to become a courtesan. Her work is made easier by her husband, who refuses her entry into the house when she returns home from the function well past midnight, which helps her to execute her plan smoothly and to brush her last hitch aside. Commenting on her exit Dalmia aptly remarks, “His insane jealousy, her own extreme dissatisfaction and her pride lead to a violent exchange between the two (and) Suman picking up her suitcase departs into an unknown and uncertain future” (332). However, this decision is not an easy job for Suman, which she takes amidst serious constraints, as Safadi says, “Suman, a married woman, chose of her own volition,



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

albeit in difficult circumstances, to become a courtesan.” (Safadi, 2009: 26) Nevertheless, she still hesitates in declaring herself a public woman, as “she possessed natural human aversion to wrongdoing” (Premchand, 2005: 45). Consequently, after leaving home Suman seeks shelter in Padam Singh house, which though does not last long, as Padam Singh fears for his reputation being sullied by her presence. It forces Suman to approach Bholi willy-nilly, though she still “genuinely prides herself on her chastity and has severe misgivings” (Safadi, 2009: 33). Bholi as expected welcomes her warmly, makes her stay comfortable there and also teaches her the art of singing and enticing people, which Suman learns quickly and soon proves an instant hit in the market of beauty. She, however, “resolves to defend her chastity at all costs and never to compromise her virtue, but to sing and dance alone.” (Guru, 1967: 145) However, as per her wont she soon gets bored, as she “discovers that the respect she thought went with it is really only an illusion.” (Safadi, 2009: 33) In the mean time, she, however, gets an ardent customer in Sadan, a young man, who is none else than the nephew of Padam Singh. Having thus known the real identity of Sadan, Suman shows her class and not only returns to Padam Singh the bracelet that Sadan has stolen for her, but also discontinues her relationship with him. Meanwhile, the local Municipal Board decides to bar the courtesans from practising in the city, in the wake of which a social reformer Vitthaldas persuades Suman to return to a ‘dignified profession’, consequently, Suman realizes for the first time “that happiness was born out of contentment, and respect out of service.” (Premchand, 2005: 72) It is also around this time that she learns that due to her odious profession the marriage of her younger sister Shanta has been called off and that her prospective groom is Sadan himself. Thus, persuaded by her own conscience and the pleadings of Vitthaldas, Suman bids adieu to the brothel and shifts to the widows’ home (vidhva-ashram), a charitable institution that looks after the helpless widows, where “a paragon of virtue” replaces “the arrogant, vain, shallow Suman” (Safadi, 2009: 34). Also as if to expiate all her sins, from dusting rooms, teaching widows the art of sewing, cooking and singing devotional songs, etc. to self-study she does all the works in the ashram voluntarily and “seems completely a changed woman.” (Premchand, 2005: 157)



Coincidentally, Suman meets her younger sister Shanta in the ashram, who too has joined it following the rejection of her marriage. However, since her dubious past haunts her she doesn't remain happy there for long, as the common feeling spreads around is that "the home's reputation is sullied by her presence" (Sattar, 2006). The two sisters, therefore, quit the ashram, soon after which they have a chance encounter with Sadan at the riverbank. Later, the real identities of the two sisters become open to Sadan, who feels repentant and although still in love with Suman, he marries "the more pacific Shanta, to whom he had been betrothed all along." (Dalmia, 2006: 325) Suman also goes to live with the young couple, but to her dismay Shanta who is now happy with her husband treats her as an eyesore and taunts her for her former attachment with Sadan. She also watches "each move Suman makes with suspicion and dislike, (and) unfortunate Suman finds herself increasingly unwelcome in their house" (343). Suman, who always craves for recognition, is extremely distressed at this bizarre treatment and perhaps for the first time, she finds herself in a helpless state with no courage to face her sister any longer. In sheer desperation she decides to commit suicide by drowning, when in a dramatic move her former husband Gajadhar, now turned into a recluse known Gajanand, dashes in from nowhere and saves her life. He also offers her to work in the orphanage he runs, which she readily accepts. It leads her to yet another transformation, "Wonderful feelings of faith and devotion dawned in her heart...she hadn't in her wildest dreams believed that ... she would be given such a great opportunity to serve." ((Premchand, 2005: 264-265)

Thus, the pathetic story of Suman ends on a positive note "with running Seva Sadan (Home of Service), a shelter for the children of former prostitutes." (Sattar, 2006) However, peace of mind still eludes Suman, as now she is worried for the bleak future of the inmates of the destitute home, which she shares with Subhadra, when she visits her in the orphanage. Besides, she looks all the more worried for her own isolation and is bothered at the growing antipathy of Padam Singh towards her, as he does not come along with his wife to meet her. She also fears that in future he might not allow even Subhadra to come to her, which clearly reflects the enormity of her sense of



insecurity. She also understands that Subhadra does not want to be identified with her, so while leaving, she categorically asks Suman not to accompany her out to see her off. Nevertheless, Suman expresses her gratitude towards Subhadra in most piteous words saying, “You are a true jewel in the community of women...I shall consider myself your servant as long as I live, I will remain grateful to you.” (Dalmia, 2006: 344) Suman is probably all the more sad to see that even Shanta and Sadan avoid visiting her and merely send a donation of two rupees every month for Sevasadan. It all speaks Suman’s “loneliness and isolation, and her need to be connected to the world she once knew, than of any real satisfaction derived from being there.” (344) Thus, Suman remains engaged all her life grappling with various adversities arising mostly out of the vagaries of her mind, but eventually fails to overcome them. She always feels discontented and insecure, and keeps on complaining; because of this, even while serving in the destitute home (sevasadan), where she has “found the ‘respect born out of service’ even to the point of glowing articles about her in the newspaper, but she has not found the “happiness born out of contentment.” (Safadi, 2009: 35)

On the other hand, Nirmala’s problem is by and large emotional, who as indicated above turns somewhat frigid when it comes to have a romantic communion with her aged husband, a man of her father’s age, who she can respect, but can’t long for any emotional fulfillment. Thus, it is, probably, in a bid to satisfy her emotional cravings that she develops a fondness for her eldest stepson Mansaram, who is of her own age and is handsome, cheerful and shy, in whose company she gets immense pleasure and forgets all “her worries for a little while” (Premchand, 1988: 48). Although there is no iota of an ulterior motive in her heart, Totaram gets scary when he makes out that Mansaram meets Nirmala daily under the pretext of teaching her English. It leads him to ill-treat Mansaram, call him names and to decide to admit him in a boarding school. Nirmala, who is able to read the screwed mind of her husband correctly, distances herself from Mansaram and resolves that “she would give up studying and would not speak to Mansaram even accidentally; she would not even look at him” (65). Mansaram, who is already in great distress at his father’s unfair treatment, finds the enigmatic behaviour of his stepmother almost intolerable, as she looks normal otherwise,



but turns rude in the presence of his father. Perplexed Mansaram wonders whether his stepmother is “a Goddess of affection, parental love and humility, or a deluding image of envy and evil?” (70) He, therefore, shuts him up in his room, gives up eating properly, keeps on weeping all the time, and in utter confusion, eventually shifts to the hostel on his own, where within a few days he falls seriously ill and is hospitalized under the care of Dr. Bhuvanmohan Sinha, who is the man who happens to have broken off his marriage with Nirmala for dowry. Curiously, though unaware of this relationship, he takes care of Mansaram indulgently, but despite his best efforts, the condition of the patient keeps deteriorating. Learning about this, Nirmala, daring the hostile reaction of her crazy husband reaches the hospital, where Mansaram as if waking up from his slumber falls at her feet and begs her forgiveness, saying “I will never forget your affection (and) My only prayer to God is that my next birth will be in your womb, so that I may repay my debt to you” (96-97). In fact, by this time Mansaram has already understood the crooked thought of his father and the predicament of his stepmother, who does all this not only to prove his own innocence before his father, but also to attest the chastity of his stepmother. Nirmala consoles the ailing boy, and then learning from her husband about the doctors’ advice for a blood transfusion, she volunteers to donate her own blood, despite being prohibited by her husband for health reasons. Belittled Totaram breaks in tears and begs Nirmala’s forgiveness for being unjust towards her all along. However, before the doctor carries out the blood transfusion “Mansaram with the last glimmer of his shining character took his leave of this world of illusion and deception.” (97)

Besides, Nirmala has also to cope with Rukmini, her hostile sister-in-law, who entertains a grudge against her ever since she replaces her as the in charge of the household. From then onward Rukmini always tries to embarrass her to prove her unfit to hold the above charge. Besides, she often prompts children to pester her for pocket money and scolds her in both the situations, if she refuses it she would say that without a mother who cares “if children stay alive or not?” and if yields she would accuse her of spoiling the children and would say, “Without a mother who can explain to them that they shouldn’t stuff themselves with sweets?” (Premchand, 1988: 43) She also



keeps a watch on her movements and even reads her letters just to find an excuse to question her conduct. Oppressed Nirmala eventually brings it to the notice of her husband, who grabs it as a opportunity to flatter his indifferent wife. He, therefore, assures her to tell Rukmini that she is merely your helper and that “If she bothers you instead of helping you, she doesn’t have to go on living with us” (44) He also prompts Nirmala to punish the children, if they trouble her, saying, “I can see that those brats are turning out to be no good. I’ll send off Mansaram to a boarding school and I’ll straighten out those other two right now” (44). Accordingly, the same evening Totaram warns his sister in most insulting terms, “Well sister, do you wish to live in this house or not? If you want to stay here then don’t cause trouble and don’t make it hard for others to get along here.” (44) The cutting words of her younger brother shocks and surprises Rukmini beyond measure, but she tolerates, holding Nirmala responsible for poisoning the ears of her innocent brother. Soon thereafter Totaram reprimands his two younger sons, Jiyaram and Siyaram and forbids them from entering into their stepmother’s room in future, against which Jiyaram asks impudently, why he doesn’t speak anything to her for not giving them any money. Siyaram supports his brother’s contentions, at which Totaram loses his balance and lifts the boy by the ears. Hearing his shrieks Rukmini rushes up, snatches the crying child and scolds her brother “what I’ve always said is true, when a man takes a new wife he goes blind. With things in such a state from now on, only the good Lord can save this house. (46) Nirmala too rushes to the rescue of the boy, but Rukmini taunts her of being a stepmother, saying, “When you have children of your own, your eyes will open up. People care only about their own grief, never somebody else’s.” (46) Nirmala swears innocence and Totaram supports her saying that he himself has noticed that the boys are turning obstinate, at which Rukmini snubs him, “Untill now you have never been able to find fault with any of them— how come your eyes have become so sharp all of a sudden?” (46) Totaram replying meekly blames Rukmini of making the children impudent, which the latter protests strongly, “So now I’m to blame for everything! So it’s only because of me that your house is coming apart ...Then listen I’m finished with it. From now on whether there’s murder or mayhem, don’t expect me to say another word.” (46) Saying so, Rukmini departs, but Nirmala comes forward picks up the sobbing child



“hugged him to her breast carried him to her room and began to soothe him” (47). Feeling secured in her lap, the boy soon quietens, which arouses the motherly instinct of Nirmala, as has experienced never before. Consequently, she decides to get closer to the boys in future to give them a motherly care that she has not been able to do earlier, because of her sister-in-law. However, the biggest predicament of Nirmala is that her husband doesn't take it kindly that Nirmala sits in the company of his children, particularly Mansaram. Therefore, when he notices the proximity between Nirmala and Mansaram, he turns nervous, nay amok, which eventually claims even the life of his innocent son.

In fact, Nirmala's role as a stepmother has always been under scanner, but after the death of Mansaram it comes directly under fire. Totaram loses control over his remaining two sons, who become cheeky, since unscrupulous elements around arouse them against their parents. One day, Jiyaram openly accuses his father of poisoning Mansaram, but when Totaram snubs him, the boy behaves insolently. At this Nirmala, who has returned from her maternal home after attending her younger sister's marriage only a few days' back, turns jittery and even dares him for his behaviour. Totaram, encouraged by this unexpected support, moves forward and tries to hit the boy, who challenges him to “talk from a safe distance (and avoid) disgracing yourself all for nothing” (Premchand, 1988: 133) Rukmini tries to intervene, but Totaram remains insistent and threatens the boy to throw him out. Oppressed by this, Nirmala wants to go back to her mother's house to avoid any confrontation, but then Rukmini, in a surprise shift of mood, turns sympathetic towards Nirmala and rules out the idea alleging that in her absence “there would have been a real catastrophe today,” at which Nirmala striking a pessimistic note says, “What more catastrophe can there be...I walk as on eggshells here and even so, I'm deemed wicked. It all started in no time at all after I sat foot in this house.” (134) Further, as if not enough, Jiyaram, who falls in bad company, steals Nirmala's jewellery box and sells the ornaments in the market. Although Nirmala notices Jiyaram walking out of her room on the fateful night, she avoids naming him lest everybody should treat her as biased. She even also tries to stop Totaram from lodging a complaint with the



police, but he doesn't relent. The Police Inspector after preliminary inquiries declares that the theft is the handiwork of some insider and within a few days even recovers the lost ornaments. Totaram bribes the Police Inspector to hush up the case, but only to learn soon that Jiyaram has fled away and has committed suicide. Apart from this, Siyaram, the youngest one too turns defiant, who often plays truant when it comes to do a household work, particularly the ones entrusted by Nirmala. Instead, he listens quite eagerly to those who tell him imaginary tales of atrocities perpetrated by the stepmothers, which turns him more hostile towards his father and stepmother. Meanwhile, at the grocery Siyaram encounters a false Sadhu named Parmanand, who too shows him the dread of a stepmother, beguiling him to leave home for peace and prosperity, accordingly after a few days, Siyaram deserts home and elopes with the said Sadhu. Now the position of Nirmala is rendered far more despondent, as while already carrying the blame for the loss of her two elder stepsons, she now faces the ignominy of turning also the third one out. Totaram openly accuses her of ruining his household, alleging that "you've laid waste a flourishing garden. Only one stamp was left, and now that you've wiped out every trace of him you can be content." (157) He also blames her for treating the children rudely, saying, "Those boys who were so delicately reared you treated like servants before my very eyes. And I, seeing it all, sat by like a blind man. Just go and give me a little arsenal. This is the end, there was only this left to hurt me and now this is taken care of to." (157) Nirmala, in view of the delicacy of the situation, however, reacts but only meekly, "How unlucky I am! If you tell me to, I'll go away. I don't know why God brought me into the world. But how can you assume Siyaram won't ever come back?" (157) Totaram still refuses to soften his attitude and says, "Don't get angry, go and celebrate – now your heart's desire has been fulfilled." (157) Nirmala perhaps not even in her dreams has ever expected a bigger curse than her husband's such wild accusations, but she keeps her emotions in control, thinking that it is in his agony that he speaks so harsh words. Truly, the death of Mansaram leaves Totaram heartbroken, Nirmala, therefore, looks at his wretched life with pity rather than hatred. Meanwhile, in utter desperation Totaram sets out on an unknown journey in search of Siyaram, which, however, eventually proves worthless.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

However, the worst of the humiliations that Nirmala ever suffers in life is an attempt to defile her chastity by none else than Doctor Bhuvanmohan, her ex fiancé and the husband of her close friend Sudha, who also treated Mansaram in the hospital. In fact, after the death of his son, Totaram, who has developed a special bond with Doctor Bhuvanmohan, keeps him visiting frequently, as in his company he gets some solace. This association eventually matures into a family friendship and the wives of the two, Nirmala and Sudha too become friends and they exchange regular visits to one another's place. Later, having discovered that her husband is the same fellow who calls off his marriage with Nirmala for dowry reasons, Sudha corners her husband on the point and snubs him for his greed for money and also for his foolishness to reject as beautiful and virtuous a woman as Nirmala. Filled with remorse by this moral pressure, Bhuvanmohan eventually decides to marry his younger brother with Krishna, the younger sister of Nirmala without taking any dowry and even sends money to her mother for the marriage expenses incognito. The marriage gives new dimensions to the friendship between Sudha and Nirmala and brings them still closer and from then onward, Sudha stands behind Nirmala amidst all her ordeals and after the departure of Totaram to look for his lost son she becomes the only resort for Nirmala where she forgets all her worries, "As a drunkard forgets all his cares in the intoxication of wine." (Premchand, 1988: 161) As a result, the exchange of visits between the two ladies to one another's place becomes more frequent, in the process of which one day Bhuvanmohan, taking undue advantage of the absence of his wife, tries to outrage the modesty of Nirmala, but she saves herself by leaving the place immediately. On her return Sudha gets the hint of something having gone amiss in her absence with Nirmala, at which she confronts her husband who after making a few lame excuses eventually tells her the truth. Anguished Sudha chides her husband in severe terms to the extent that unable to withstand the shame and moral pressure he commits suicide by consuming poison. Hearing the sad news Nirmala meets Sudha, who tells her all about the incident, including that earlier also she notices the doctor often gazing at her, but then "I thought that perhaps I was deceived. But now it became obvious what the meaning of those looks was! If I'd more experience I would not have let you come to my house. At least, I'd never have let his eyes fall on you, but how did I know that men say one thing



and feel something quite different?”(166) Demonstrating her courage of conviction, Sudha accepts her lot without any regrets as one ordained by the God.

Further, the departure of Totaram to look for his lost son leaves Nirmala totally forlorn, inasmuch as she does not take proper care even of her dear daughter, a work that is now done for her by Rukmini, her widowed sister-in-law. In fact, Nirmala is now more worried for the uncertain future of her daughter, thinking, “There was nothing for the young to depend on for survival...Who would be there to beg for her little girl’s wedding?” (Premchand, 1988: 157) Owing to this, Nirmala turns into a miser and also short tempered, so “The whole day nothing but harsh and cutting words came from her mouth (and there) was no “trace of sweetness left in her feelings” (160) She now thinks everybody in the family a burden on her, including ones like her own little daughter Asha, sister-in-law Rukmini and the dedicated maid Bhungi, who unable to withstand her abusive talks even leaves the house. Nevertheless, Nirmala remains devoted to her husband until the last and does not flaunt even a bit of contempt towards him at any point of time. Her fortitude and endurance reaches at its pinnacle when in the end she most unduly holds her own self guilty for the ruin of the family and craves for her husband’s forgiveness before Rukmini, saying, “Unlucky woman that I am, no one ever got any happiness from me. Anyone my shadow fell upon was destroyed. If my husband ever comes home, please ask him to forgive the mistakes of a luckless woman.” At the same time, she also begs forgiveness from Rukmini, “I did not serve you and I’m sorry about that” (168). In the end, seeing her death near, as if making her last wish she entreats her sister-in-law, “When I die, I leave the child to you. If she survives, marry her into a decent family. I couldn’t do anything for her in my own life. I’m guilty only of bringing her into the world. Let her be an old maid, or kill her with poison rather than tying her to an unworthy man, that’s all I ask of you”. (168)

In a nut shell, Premchand has portrayed both Suman and Nirmala as beautiful and talented women, who fall victims to the same social curse, dowry and mismatched marriage, though their reactions to it differ as per their individual traits and preferences in life. Accordingly, Suman adopts a



rebellious stance and leaves home in search of recognition and self-identity. She is bold and rebellious and aspires for a luxurious life free from inhibitions and tyranny and wishes always to command admiration and respect from others. She is also haughty and proud and all her life “had lived like a queen. In her husband’s home, even when she endured hardships, she was still queen. In the brothel, everyone listened to her. In the ashram, her piety and service had made her most respected” (Premchand, 2005: 243). Her entry into the bazaar of beauty “challenged the status of Hindu marriage as an inviolable social institution” (Dalmia, 2006: 331). She also has a quick sense of perception and is capable of airing her views logically and boldly even on such vexed matter as marriage, as Dalmia points out, “Suman’s deeply reflexive and dry conclusions, her estimation of marriage as prostitution though with a single client, can be regarded as no other than revolutionary for her times” (332). She never has any regrets for her acts, as she justifies her stand of becoming a courtesan, ridiculing even Padam Singh, her own benefactor, for his conduct during the *mujra* at his house, “Bholi was sitting in front of you with pride and you sat as an embodiment of honour and devotion before her. Your friends danced like puppets at her instance. It cast upon me the same influence, which one expected from a simple woman eager for honour.” (Guru, 1967: 143) She also comes down heavily upon the patriarchal social norms, saying, “Wives are easily acquired and easily disregarded. Social esteem is reserved for the very public women, each married man would be quick to condemn at home.” (Dalmia, 2006: 332) At the same time, she also criticizes men for their timidity and says, “Men are fickle, easily swayed, and when it comes to taking quick, bold action to retrieve a situation, they are usually found to be missing. If they come to the rescue at all, it is usually after the event.” (332) Suman demonstrates the same level of intelligence and articulation in her conversations with Vitthaldas, when he tries to persuade her to return to a dignified profession. Responding curtly, she scolds the entire Hindu society for its hypocrisy, which pushes innocent women into prostitution and when Vitthaldas “accuses her of having shamed the whole Hindu race, she points out how many respectable Hindu gentlemen have come to hear her sing.” (Dalmia, 2006: 333) However, being a victim of the social hypocrisy, Suman always remains unhappy, as even after quitting the brothel and joining the widows’ home peace and contentment



elude her and the stigma of her past continues to haunt her. Nothing can perhaps be more shocking for her than the fact that due to her dubious past the marriage of her younger sister Shanta, despite all her personal merits, fails to solemnize. Besides, Suman's conduct at times looks somewhat enigmatic, as for instance, even when she finally makes up her mind to leave the brothel for the widows home, she does not betray any trace of embarrassment on her face. She appears quite playful with her clients and remains in her usual flamboyant mood, at which Sadiq wonders, "That a woman with Suman's charity should succumb to horseplay, at a moment when she is feeling most humble, is entirely out of character." (Sadiq, 1964: 348) However, Suhrawardy on this count tries to find flaw with the writer's style of characterization, whose "touch becomes uncertain and the action and reaction of characters cease to be in keeping with their personality as depicted in the early part of the story," he says. (Suhrawardy, 1945: 193)

As against this, Nirmala always surrenders to the wishes of her husband and never opens her mouth before him let alone of deserting him. She always treats her husband with utmost respect, obeys him, and avoids doing things that might annoy him, thereby suppressing her own feelings. Sudha attributes this to the strength of her character, due to which "She's spending the days of her life with that decrepit old lawyer. I would long since have taken poison. But on surface you can hardly tell how miserable she is. She laughs, talks, and wears jewels and fine clothes, but inside she is weeping all the time." (Premchand, 1988: 102) Also, in reply to her husband's insinuation that Nirmala might have complained against her husband, Sudha shoots back, "Why should she complain? Isn't he her husband? The only thing she has in the world is vakil sahib. Whether he is old or sick, he's there and he's her husband. Woman of good birth do not criticize their husbands—only sluts do that. Nirmala may grieve over her situation but never says one word about it" (102). However, the only exception to it is her younger sister Krishna, with whom Nirmala discusses anything freely and frankly. Thus, in her very first meeting after marriage, sharing her agony with Krishna, Nirmala regrets that she always serves her husband like a God and which he reciprocates well, "but what can either of us do about things that are out of our control? He can't be young, nor



can I be an old woman.” (110) She also tells her as to how her husband has tried various methods to look young and she has given up taking milk and ghee to look old, but everything has proved ineffective. Similarly, though denying any immoral intentions towards him, Nirmala also tells her sister frankly about her fondness for Mansaram and her intense longings for him, saying, “That was why I invented the pretext of studying, for otherwise he wouldn’t have even come into my part of the house. I know that if there had been any sinful intention in his heart I could have done anything and everything for him.” (110) Krishna feels embarrassed for her sister being so blunt, at which Nirmala says ruefully, “Yes, yes when you hear it said it sounds wicked and it is wicked, but no one can change a person’s nature. You tell me: if you were married to a fifty-year old man what would you do?” (110) Nevertheless, Nirmala can’t be regarded as a bold person, as she has no courage to speak the truth before her husband. She makes no protest, when Totaram suspects her of having an illicit relation with Mansaram and accuses her for all the mishaps taking place in the family, though for that he himself is genuinely responsible. Besides, except her younger sister she doesn’t share her dilemma with anybody, particularly about her ticklish relations with the children. Obviously, it is this timidity that takes a heavy toll and ends up in the destruction of the entire Munshi family. However, Nirmala eventually regrets for having kept mum on certain vital occasions, as for instance she even after seeing Jiyaram steal her jewellery she does not stop him, fearing that people will believe that she is making a false accusation out of ill-will, but the next moment she asks herself, “If she had stopped Jiyaram that very instant and he, shamed, had run away somewhere, would she not have been blamed for that as well?” (157)

Based on the above, it can be surmised that Premchand is well conversant with the women’s psychology. He projects Suman as an envious, impatient and capricious person, who always wants a better deal than others near her, might it be even her own sister, benefactors Bholi, or Subhadra, the wife of Padam Singh. She always envies them and even wants to outsmart them in their own fields. She is also an unpredictable, unstable and pessimist character, as she sees the world “as a glass half empty (she) is always a sad and pathetic character and is never destined to be happy” as



she finds no peace and contentment in any of her “incarnations.” (Safadi, 2009: 35) On the contrary, *Nirmala* is portrayed as a weak and docile character, who suffers her lot with stoical fortitude, accepting it as *fait accompli*. Like *Suman*, she too is unhappy for her mismatched marriage with an aged man, but unlike her she never ever thinks of resorting to rebelliousness and opening her mouth before her husband let alone of deserting him and always surrenders to his wishes in the best tradition of a traditional Hindu wife. Thus, while depicting both the ladies with contrarian traits, Premchand has undoubtedly been able to demonstrate his tremendous grasp over the women’s psyche.

Works Cited

- Dalmia, Vasudha. “Vision of a New Banaras and New Novel in Hindi” in *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*, Edited by Martin Gaenzle, Jörg Gengnagel, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006.
- Guru, Rajeshwar. *Premchand: Ek Adhyayan*, S. Chand and Company, 1967.
- Orr, Inge C. *Premchand’s Use of Folklore in His Short Stories*, Padmaja Publications, 1957, <http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/1050>
- Pandey, Geetanjali. “How Equal?: Women in Premchand’s Writings”, *JSTOR: Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.21, No. 50 (Dec. 13, 1986), pp. 2183-2187.
- Premchand. *Nirmala*, Translated by David Rubin. Orient Paperbacks, 1988
- . *Sevasadan*, Rajkamal Paperbacks, 1994.
- . *Courtesan’s Quarter: A Translation of Bazaar-e-Husn*, with notes by Amina Azfar, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- . *Sevasadan*, Translated by Snehal Shingavi, with an introduction by Vasudha Dalmia, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Rubin, David. “Introduction” *The Oxford India Premchand: Alok Rai, (Translator) Oxford Indian Collection*, Oxford University Press, 2004.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

- Sadiq, Muhammad. *A History of Urdu Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Safadi, Alison. “The “Fallen” Woman in Two Colonial Novels: Umra’o Jan Ada and Bazar-e Husn/Sevasadan, In Memory of Ralph Russell (1918-2008)” in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, January 2009, Vol. 24, pp.16-53. Accessed on 15 April 2018.
[www.urdustudies.com/pdf/24/05 SafadiEssay.pdf](http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/24/05_SafadiEssay.pdf)
- Sattar, Arshia. *Info Change News and Features*, February 2006. Accessed on 15 April 2018.
<http://infochangeindia.org/women/books-a-reports/sumans-story.html>
- Sollars, Michael D. and A.L. Jennings, Eds. Contributed by G.R. Taneja, *The Facts on File Companion to the World Novel, 1900 to Present*. Facts on File- An Imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2008.
- Suhrawardy, Shaista Akhtar Begum. *A Critical Survey on the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story*. Longmans, Green & Company, 1945.