

## The Concept of Subaltern in Munshi Premchand's *Sevasadan*

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### Abstract

Subaltern in literature has been projected in multiple ways by different writers. Even, Premchand has projected various sections of people in different ways in his novels. Munshi Premchand is one of the major writers in modern Hindi literature. For him, novel is a social and historical document. As a writer, Premchand studies life very minutely and he himself shared the sufferings and problems of the subaltern section of the society in India. He objectively analyses the problems of the subaltern section and he is never satisfied with the mere descriptions. He intends to eradicate those problems which have eaten into the vitals of the lower and the middle class of society. He is the writer who portrays the grim reality of Indian society especially the rural and semi urban settings. Premchand presents the socio-economic and political derivation of the disadvantaged sections of colonial India. This paper gives a brief account to the life of the subalterns as shown in *Sevasadan*. Subaltern Studies' assumes a special significance in Indian historiography which is necessary to understand the need of all the subordinated people like peasants, workers, lower caste women and dalits whose voices were seldom recorded before in history, in one way or the other. Therefore, the word 'subaltern' will recur in the present study as a term for the general attribute of subordination in the society in terms of caste, color, creed, religion, gender or on the ethnic basis, because of the long history of subjugation of the subalterns.

**Keywords:** social concerns, subaltern, dalit, untouchables, marginalized

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### Introduction

Every person in this universe is subordinated to someone or something in one way or the other, because he has a sequence of ideas in his mind. In other words, a person seems to have independent but in reality, he is in the clutches of a cruel system everywhere. These clutches belong to a particular social scenario in which man survives and spends his time. In the real sense, man and this social setup are not two separate entities; as a fish into water and the water into the fish are obviously different but they are the integral aspects of a single universe. This universe seems to have pluralism but there is not any real plurality. This interdependency of human beings is the soul of the social or conventional scenario which grows definite ways of thinking in the life of a person. These ways of thinking, as experienced by a particular group of people, become the tradition of that particular sphere. The members of that particular group think tradition to be natural element of their life. They do not want to have any kind of suspense with it. Any resistance to it becomes a protest to the oppositional part. Indian society has been growing in dimensions and many other motifs, ideas and morals for a long time. On the surface level these dimensions seem to be influenced only by the political domination of the British Empire over India because the British rule severely affected the Indian sensibility and made the Indian its subalterns in all aspects of their life. The subaltern sections of the society which are always at the receiving end are the subject to the activity of the elite groups even when they rebel and rebound. The ruling groups have always suppressed the society. This research paper will analyze the wide gulf yawing between haves and the have-nots of the society. As an academic discipline 'the Subaltern Studies' emerged in India in 1980. It has provided a new perspective on the history of the colonized from the view point

of colonizer. With the passage of time the perspective offered by this school has gained a world-wide fame. That is why the influence of subaltern studies can be felt in Latin American studies, African studies, cultural studies and the other areas. In the past the history of Modern India particularly of nationalist movement was etched as a history of Indian elites but now this history is being rewritten primarily from the perspectives of subaltern groups. The very word 'Subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* is "any officer in British army who is lower in rank than a captain" (1541). As far as the origin of this term is concerned, it was the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who first used this word in the context of non-military sense and it is only through him that this term acquired so much approval in the post-colonial studies. The work of subaltern studies is considered as a collective group of South Asian historians who are interested in exploring the role of non-elite actors in South Asian history. That is why, it is thought that this term is used as synonymous of proletariat and it was mainly due to its relentless postcolonial critique that Indian History came to be seen in a distinct life. Thus Indian History has been enriched with many perspectives coming from the subaltern group. There are several thinkers who have tried to define this term in their own point of view contexts. Famous among these are Homi Bhaba, Eric Stokes, David Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjit Guha, Gyan Prakash, David Hardiman, Ajay Skaria, Mamata Kalia, Gautam Bhadra, K. Sivaram Krishnan and Gayatri Spivak. In his several essays Homi Bhaba describes the most pathetic condition of subaltern in a realistic manner. He has described the subaltern group as oppressed who have always been suppressed by the majority groups. He refers to this in the light of hegemonic power structure and struggle against

globalizations particularly the struggle against social exclusion. Gayatri Chakraboty Spivak rightly explains this term in more specific or more scientific manner.

In her famous essay titled "Can the Subaltern speak?" writes: "The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with women as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). In the above cited essay, Spivak gives the examples of widow who are burnt at the pyre of the husband. Spivak argues that women are doubly marginalized – firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonization. Thus, the postcolonial studies respond with great enthusiasm to Spivak's above cited essay and as a result, there seems a little agreement within postcolonial studies about the worst victims of colonial oppression, or about the most significant anti-colonial insurgencies. She concludes her provocative essay by categorically insisting that the "subaltern cannot speak" (308). Hence, through Spivak, postcolonial studies seem to represent a confusing and an unpleasant babble of subaltern voices. Leela Gandhi aptly defines subaltern studies as "an attempt to allow people finding to speak within jealous pages of elitist, historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed" (1-2). Ranjit Guha, the Founding member of the Subaltern group, also presents subalternism in its multiplicity. To him the prime objective of this group, as he states in his book *Subaltern Studies Vol.1*, is "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies" (7).

According to Guha, subordination in its multiple forms is the pivot of the subaltern studies. He believes that: "The politics of Subaltern constituted an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter" (202). The impact of subordination on intellectual life of disadvantaged people covers an analysis of the psychological confusion of men and women. Edward Said's work *Orientalism* explains the way in which Orientalists produce the foundation and the justification for the domination of the 'Other' through colonialism. Marxist historians have already begun to view colonial history from the perspective of proletariat but sometimes it seems unsatisfied. So, the Marxist school is challenged because of the fact that their mode of production based narratives has a tendency of merging inevitably into the nationalist ideology of modernity and progress. As a matter of fact, the subaltern study has offered an alternative perspective on various issues which get reflected in the discipline of History, Anthropology, Sociology, and Human Geography and above all in literature.

Yet, the 'Subaltern Studies' assumes a special significance in Indian historiography which is necessary to understand the need of all the subordinated people like peasants, workers, lower caste women and dalits whose voices were seldom recorded before in history, in one way or the other. Therefore, the word 'subaltern' will recur in the present study as a term for the general attribute of subordination in the society in terms of caste, color, creed, religion, gender or on the ethnic basis, because of the long history of subjugation of the subalterns. It was not only a political agenda but social, cultural, religious, economic and psychological also which made an effort to give a new direction to the traditional inheritance of a particular community. Premchand, being a great Indian writer, had experienced all these dimensions with

his own sensibility alive in him. He wrote novels with purpose and in his hands, a novel was only a literary means, through which he could draw the attention of masses towards the social problems.

*Sevasadan*, Premchand's first novel which was earlier published as a *Bazar-e-Husan* in the Urdu version, tells a tale of an unhappy wife who is beguiled away from the path of domestic virtue into becoming a courtesan. But later on, she reforms herself by serving as the manager of an orphanage-the *Sevasadana*, for the young daughters of courtesans. In the process of her transformation, Suman the heroine of the novel has to suffer various levels of subordination.

It is not only Suman who has to suffer such sorts of humiliation but apart from her, there is an array of characters including Padamsingh, Pandit Umanath, Madansingh, Subinspector Krishnachandra, Shanta and Subhadra who are oppressed by the harsh conditions of their own life. It is just not sufficient to prove such kind of subordination but besides this, one can find there, more oppression, as far as the setting of the novel is concerned. So, marginalization can be seen, felt and smelt everywhere in this novel, not only from the single angle of life but from multiple angles of life such as social, economic, political, religious and psychological etc.

First of all, if *Sevasadan* is analyzed in the light of subalternism, economic exploitation seems to be the most striking aspect of this novel as money or lack of money is a recurrent motif in this novel. Getting, keeping, owing, bequeathing provide the intricacies to Premchand's plots. So character after character is created round this motif of money. Social status without money is almost unthinkable. Hence it can be said that money is the weapon by which a villain thwarts the aspirations of the hero and the two are chiefly distinguished by their attitude towards it. In other words, money is the instrument of power in Premchand's novel. From the beginning of the novel to the end almost every character from the upper class to the lower class, seems to be humiliated by the weapon of money. The reason lies in the fact that as a realist, Premchand's aim was not only to give a picture of the miserable lot but also to highlight the wide gulf that is yawning between the rich and the poor. At the very opening of the novel, the subordinates of Krishnachandra seem to suffer through the lack of money. They can do anything for money. Although, Krishnachandra has been a conscientious and honest sub-inspector of police throughout his life, he is not able to preserve these values. Furthermore, one can find that the people wish to abolish dowry system from the society but due to lack of money they seem helpless before this vice. When Krishnachandra searches a bridegroom for his daughter, even after consulting the astrologer and examining horoscopes, the talk is turned down. Although the educated people are sympathetic to Krishnachandra but due to problem of money, everyone comes up with such unique explanation that Krishnachandra is left dumbfounded. It is observed from the novel that Krishnachandra has been above board throughout his life. But, when he faces the demands of a dowry for his daughter's marriage, puts his honesty of twenty-five years in cold storage and fall prey to corrupt practices. He himself articulates: "I, too will use corruption to my advantage. That is the only option I have. It is clearly. The way of the world. Perhaps it is God's way as well. From today, I will be like all the others" (3). Krishnachandra doesn't want to follow that ways of corruption but due to his poor

economic condition, he seems to succumb before the need of money. Consequently, the inability of Subinspector Krishnachandra, to manage a good dowry for his daughter, compels him to marry her daughter off with Gajadhar, a thirty years old clerk earning a low salary of fifteen rupees per month. Premchand is particularly keen to bring out the tribulations of various personas in this novel. That is why, on the basis of money, Krishnachandra is a not single victim of it, but Suman's husband, Gajadhar, Padamsingh, Pandit Vitthaldas, Sadansingh, Lala Bhagatram and Pandit Umanath equally suffer through the acute shortage of money. On the other hand, Padamsingh is also not able to bear the hardship of money in his adverse conditions. It is clear, when his nephew, Sadansingh, comes to live with him, Padamsingh manages a teacher who is ready to teach him at 20 rupees per month. Though, he is facing acute shortage of money. Padamsingh shares his problem of money with his wife Subhadra and cut down his own personal expenses. As the story accelerates, Pandit Umanath, Shanta's maternal uncle, even after having a high status in his society is subjected to economic humiliation. He fixes Shanta's wedding on the promise of a thousand rupee as dowry. Even after this, he is worried about finding the money to pay for the other expenses for wedding and he still needs at least another thousand rupees. He is unable to manage that money. Applying the principles of economical exploitation in *Sevasadan*, Lala Bhagatram who enjoys a high status in the market, may be observed a helpless creature due to the lack of money. It is clear, when Padamsingh goes to Lala Bhagatram regarding the rehabilitation of courtesans, Bhagatram wants to help Padamsingh in this matter with heart, but he is helpless due to his economic subservience to Seth Chimmanlal.

The novel *Sevasadan* can be analyzed from the point of view of social subordination because Premchand has projected the root-cause of the social evils. This social subservience was also the process of imperialism in India. It had been humiliating the people so much that women had to go on the roads and sell their honour in the open markets. There seems not lack of women like Suman who is subjected to accept a degraded life due to the traditional rituals of men like Gajadhar who assists in the fall of society. The miseries of children, the gap between haves and have-nots, the evil of industrialism, maladjustment in marriage, helplessness of widows, dishonesty, hypocrisy, untouchability, bribery, impact of western education and materialism are the roots of such a society having the flavor of British Raj in India. In fact, Premchand, does not react against these social curses but the reasons which are responsible to construct such a social structure. In this social scenario a person seems to be oppressed from the multiple strains of the society. At the beginning of the novel, Subinspector Krishnachandra seems to be a victim of social contradictions. When he takes bribe of three thousand rupees from a Mahantji in the case of Chetu, he does not want to disclose about this in his society because he has been an upright man throughout his life and never took bribe before. He wants to maintain his social status in the eyes of the members of his society because a simple mistake would end up his status. Furthermore, Suman, who is married off with the poor Gajadhar, seems to be a victim of social norms. Suman is a beautiful and talented girl who wants to rise up above the social conventions. She aspires to be free, to be talented, to be admired, and to be respected in the society. But,

the social conventions compel her to lead a hellish life. With the passage of time, Suman is severely trapped within the vicious circle of the social conflicts. When she sees Bholibai's performance at Padamsingh's house and compares herself with Bholi, she just wants to become like Bholibai. But these are the social restrictions which are able to stop her for doing so. Even after giving up her old profession of courtesan, Suman seems to be exploited from the social point of view. When Sadan's new born baby is six days old, there is a celebration. Madansingh along with Bhama and Subhadra joins the celebration. When Bhama talks about Suman, she seems to degrade Suman's personality due to her old assistance with prostitution and instructs Subhadra not to enter Suman inside their home. Padamsingh has also to yield before social norms. Furthermore, Umanath seems to be a victim of the social restrictions. He enjoys a high reputation in his society. In Sadan's barat when Bejnath comes to know about Umanath's niece Shanta's relationship with Suman and Krishnachandra, he comes to Madansingh saying Bhaiya! "Everything is ruined!" (146). Madansingh asks him "What, they are low caste?" (146). Then Pandit Umanath even after having high status in the Brahmin society, in the words of Bejanath seems to be an underdog of the society, as Bejnath tells Madansingh that: "They aren't low caste, but the situation is still quite grave. The bride's father was recently released from prison and her older, sister is a courtesan. Sumanbai from Dalmandi is this girl's sister" (147). In this way, Suman leads a dignified life but the stigma of her past sticks to her. Due to Suman's old profession of prostitution, the marriage of her sister Shanta fails to solemnize. Thus, Premchand has very keenly exposed the adverse conditions of Indian sensibility, wherein on one side, it compels an honest police-officer, Krishnachandra to accepting bribe and pushing a virtuous woman like Suman to prostitution while on the contrary, it identifies Shanta to be ignored only because of being the daughter of Krishnachandra and the sister of Suman. Thus, the society with its oppositions comes alive in *Sevasadan*.

The novel can also be analyzed in the light of political suppression because Premchand himself had been a victim of political suppression since the formative years of his childhood. In *Sevasadan* Premchand presents his bold statement on several political debates about marriage, sexuality and prostitution, at the time when Indian women were also being held up as standard-bearers of a nation in chains. Premchand always considered an intimate relation between literature, society and politics. To him, literature was a reflection of contemporary political circumstances. The main theme of the novel is to highlight the corrupt politics and the innocent people to be its victims. Such kind of political suppression among the subalterns is depicted through the portrayals of various characters. Obviously, Seth Chimmanlal's attachment to the dominant political power is very much strong and he described maintain it through self-willed actions. One should not forget that he wants to remain under the process of the cruel system of politics because of his helplessness. Thus, survival and the fear of death are the weaknesses of the downtrodden. When Vitthaldas goes to Seth regarding the rehabilitation of courtesans and requests him to give donation for the above said case, Seth wants to help Vitthaldas with heart. But the political conflicts compel him to remain silent in this regard. Premchand always believed in the concrete reality of politics where there is nothing pre-

dominated but all is the result of politically constructed discourses. That is why, all the people of the village, Amola are the subordinates of Pandit who bears a high political reputation in the society. Dr. Shyamcharan, the Vice-Chairman of the Board, also seems to be trapped in the circle of political powers. When Padamsingh meets him for the agreement of the resolution of courtesans, Dr. Shyamacharan fears official disapproval. He wavers in his decision, preferring to shift the responsibility on the larger Municipal Council. He expresses his political subservience to the government before Padamsingh in the following words: "I am completely in agreement with the resolution, but you are well aware that I am a government-nominated member. Until I find out what the government thinks of this solution. I can't help you in these social concerns" (159- 60).

The novel *Sevasadan* can be judged in the light of the conflicts arising from the religious disputes. Religions have played an active role in the development of civilizations. Apart from presenting, metaphysical and philosophical views of life, religions have constructed the life styles of individual and collective behavior of people. All the events in life from birth to death have become ritual-oriented in the society. Thus, Premchand depicts the hypocrisy of the so called pillars of the society including several characters of *Sevasadan*, who are subjected to marginalization, due to the rituals to the religions. Right from the beginning of the novel, all the people coming under the jurisdiction of Subinspector Krishnachandra, are marginalized by Shree Bankhebihariji in the name of religion. He enjoys a high religious status and considered to be a divine money lender in the society. All the financial transactions are conducted under his symbolic auspices of 'Shree Bankebihariji'. On the other hand, no one has courage to challenge his holiness for money. It is impossible to live in his region after denied his due.

The novel *Sevasadan*, can be subjected to the psychological oppression which has also played an active role to shape the story of the novel. For this purpose, Premchand, employs the techniques of introspection and retrospection to combine life and realism in his works. To him, man in action is less important than a man in introspection. Premchand, provides a firm basis for other writers to develop plots with a psychological consciousness. In *Sevasadan*, the Premchand provides a scope for psycho-logical studies, through which almost all the characters are presented with their own conflicts, failures and aspirations. From the very beginning of the novel, on the basis of it, Gajadhar seems to be more exploited than the other characters of the novel. His wife, Suman who later becomes a courtesan, is unable to distinguish between essential and inessential expenses at his house and exhausts his salary within 20 days of month. Gajadhar becomes angry at this but due to his inner consciousness compels him to speak nothing at this. When Gajadhar, meets Suman's father Krishnachandra in the guise of a *sadhu* then due to the pressure of his inner consciousness, he clearly confesses that he is the person who is responsible for Suman's present situation. Likewise, Gajadhar, Suman, the heroine of the novel, can also be perceived in the light of psychological suppression. When her husband compels her to leave his house, she feels free to go anywhere at first but her own psychological confusion seems to suppress her. Because of this, she is not able to choose her destination. In the middle of the novel, when Sadansingh brings a sari for Suman, she

suspects him and wants to return this sari to him but she does not want to hurt the feelings of him. When Suman comes to know from Vitthaldas that Padamsingh, for whom she has no respect for a long time, is trying his best to overcome her from the clutches of prostitution, she seems to be a victim of her own psychological confusion. She begins to admire Padamsingh, to be a very kind man and curses herself for placing many sins on him. Pandit Padamsingh is also not free from the agonies of mental turmoil. When Padamsingh is able to become the Member of Municipality, he wants to celebrate this occasion by organizing a single banquet. His friends pursue him for a performance with singing and dancing. Padamsingh does not agree with them in this respect because he himself had started a reform movement to eliminate this awful vice. He is an extremely principled man. But, before his wife desire to see that performance, he is ready to sacrifice even his own principles also because he does not want to hurt the feelings of his wife. In the end of the novel, Mahboobjaan, the head of prostitutes, can be observed in the light of psychological disappointment. She has given up her old profession of prostitution. Even after doing so, she considers herself to an underdog of her own society. She clearly mentions:

I am afraid that you will all think I am like the cat who goes on a pilgrimage after having killed hundred mice, but truly, I am going on a pilgrimage in seven days from now. One way or another, my life is over. But seeing your determination today has made me happier than I can tell. May almighty God grant your wishes! (249)

Thus, in the light of the above analysis, it is clear that in *Sevasadan*, Premchand has projected the miseries and mentality of people from the multiple angles of subalternism. Almost all major characters are subalterns to someone or something and this subalternism affects their mind and deeds in one way or the other. The elements of subalternism decide the course of action in the novel. In short, through his novels, he points out the aspects of subordination system and its impact on Indian life. The rigid social evils and class system were deep rooted in contemporary society. Premchand was successful to project it in all his works, and with highest felicity in *Sevasadan*. His contemporaries even tried to imitate him but they didn't get success. True literary geniuses are truly inimitable.

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