

EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION AND SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF "FALLEN" WOMEN IN SEVASADAN AND UMRAO JAN ADA

Mahak Sharma

Introduction

The forthcoming paper endeavours to scrutinise specific focal points: the manner in which the two novels delineate the diminishing societal status of the two heroines, Suman and Umrao Jaan, and the respective attitudes of the authors toward these women labelled as "fallen".

Narratives Of Transformation: Sevasadan and Umrao Jaan Ada

Commencing with the poignant quote, *"Eventually everyone tastes the bitter fruit of remorse,"* the subsequent narrative embarks on an exploration of two seminal novels, 'Sevasadan' and 'Umrao Jaan Ada'. Penned by the prolific authors Munshi Premchand and Mirza Hadi Rusva, these literary works exemplify the tenets of realism within an Indian context. While Premchand's distinctive narrative style defies the static nature of characters, allowing them to evolve in response to changing milieus and circumstances, Mirza Hadi Rusva's contributions also shine through, bringing depth and authenticity to the narratives.

Sevasadan, set against the backdrop of Varanasi, one of India's holiest cities, delves into the harrowing descent of a beautiful Brahmin woman, Suman, from her erstwhile position as a cherished daughter to a life mired in prostitution. The novel casts a discerning eye on the hypocrisies that pervaded Indian society, particularly concerning women's rights, the practice of dowry, and the issue of prostitution. Written during a period of significant clamour surrounding women's reform movements in India, Premchand's work lays bare the prevailing attitudes towards courtesans, who were often regarded as social pariahs to be eradicated rather than comprehended within the context that led to their unfortunate circumstances.

Apart from the primary plot that revolves around Suman's fall from grace and her subsequent quest for redemption, there exists an additional narrative strand that involves the expulsion of courtesans from the city's centre. By the early twentieth century, when Bazar-e-Husn (Sevasadan) was composed, society had witnessed substantial transformations. Emerging voices in the city sought to redefine the image of Kashi (Varanasi), distancing it from the traditional socio-cultural centrality of courtesans. As court and aristocratic patronage waned, courtesans, especially those of higher social strata, were compelled to pivot toward a different clientele. This transition resulted in a shift from the cultivation of classical musical and artistic skills, as exemplified by Umrao Jaan Ada, to a preference for more popular ghazals, reflecting the evolving tastes of the urban elite and the burgeoning middle class.

The novels intricately illuminate the interplay between societal shifts and the fate of women within this evolving landscape, offering a rich tapestry of Indian society during the period.

Umrao and Suman In 'Umrao Jan Ada' and 'Bazar-e-Husn'

The heroines of "Umrao Jan Ada" and "Bazar-e H̄usn" (also known as "Sevasadan") exhibit significant differences in their backgrounds and life choices. Umrao, a Shia Muslim, and Suman, a high-caste Hindu, come from distinct communities. Umrao was kidnapped as a child, with her destiny largely out of her control, while Suman, a married woman, made the choice, albeit under challenging circumstances, to become a courtesan.

Umrao's perspective on Suman would likely be mixed. In her conversations with Rusva at the beginning of the novel, she partially excuses girls born into the homes of prostitutes, understanding that they have limited role models and face degradation from an early age. However, her views on girls like Suman, born to respectable parents but forced into undesirable situations, are quite clear. Umrao condemns parents who put their daughters in such positions, blaming them for the downfall of many respectable women.

Umrao grew up in a loving, middle-class family and had a contented life until her abduction. She emphasises that her entry into the courtesan profession was not her choice but a result of her circumstances and powerlessness. She acknowledges her past, but does not shy away from it, stating that she had been born unlucky and left stranded by fate and chance.

Umrao's early life reflects her contentment and appreciation for her family, and she does not view herself as exceptionally beautiful. She accepts her fate and adjusts quickly to her new situation due to the kindness she receives.

On the other hand, Suman's comfortable life is disrupted when her father's imprisonment forces her family into poverty. She is initially resentful, but eventually accepts her situation. She is described as more materialistic and less content with her life compared to Umrao. Suman aspires to a luxurious life, envies others, and craves recognition and respect. Her vanity and love of display lead her to make choices, which she later regrets.

Suman's transformation takes her through various phases, from becoming a courtesan to embracing piety in a widows' ashram. Her character evolves over time, and she experiences a change in her values and priorities. However, despite her transformations, she continues to seek recognition, and her happiness remains elusive.

In contrast, Umrao's character remains consistent throughout the novel. She adapts to her circumstances and learns to find fulfilment and self-respect in her unique situation. She becomes an independent and self-reliant individual who accepts her life with serenity.

The two heroines' differing outlooks and life journeys highlight their contrasting approaches to adversity and self-discovery. While Umrao finds contentment and wisdom in her circumstances, Suman's quest for recognition and a better life leads her through various phases of change, ultimately leaving her dissatisfied and unfulfilled.

Both novels, "Umrao Jan Ada" and "Bazar-e-H̄usn," serve as platforms for their respective authors, Rusva and Premchand, to critique societal issues and expose the injustices, corruption, and hypocrisy prevalent in their societies. In these works, the heroines' experiences and transformations are central to conveying these messages.

Women Status And Representation

The issue of women's status within society has remained a continuous and prominent subject of concern since the early nineteenth century, both for social reformers and colonialists alike. During the nineteenth century, women were largely perceived as homemakers and were frequently deemed incapable of participating in the public sphere on an equal footing with men. This prevailing perception not only demeaned and debased women, but also relegated them to the singular role of childbearing. The dominance of men in this context led to a sense of entrapment among many women, as they found themselves confined within their homes, unable to escape the constraints imposed upon them by their husbands.

One illustrative portrayal of these confinements can be found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper". In this narrative, Gilman, an acclaimed feminist writer of the 19th century, presents a woman grappling with postpartum depression, who is consigned to a room that further exacerbates her psychological distress. Gilman employs this anonymous protagonist as a vehicle to challenge conventional notions of gender and to dismantle the prevailing structures of male dominance.

Throughout "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman adroitly encourages readers to interrogate societal perspectives on feminism and the delineation of gender roles. Symbolism, particularly in the form of gendered spaces, is deftly utilised to both underscore the constraints imposed upon women and to evoke empathy among readers for the travails faced by women during this era. Women in the 19th century were frequently burdened by bitterness and were deprived of essential human rights, receiving scant recompense for their contributions to society. This societal milieu, as observed in the upper echelons of Hindu families and elite strata, particularly underscores the difficulties encountered by women of that time.

In the context of the novels "Sevasadan" and "Bazar-e Husn", a comparative analysis is drawn between Premchand's and Rusva's perspectives on women. Both emphasise the nurturing and supportive roles of women, valuing them for more than their mere objectification as sexual beings. However, Premchand's representation of Subhadra, a woman unable to bear children, is indicative of the societal expectations and pressures placed upon women in the nineteenth century.

The novels also delve into distinct attitudes regarding women who transition from respectable backgrounds to become courtesans. While Premchand adopts a more stringent stance, aiming to reform such characters, Rusva demonstrates a higher degree of tolerance, acknowledging the intricacies of their existence within the broader social fabric. This variation in perspective reflects their broader societal outlook.

Ultimately, the divergent treatment of characters like Suman and Umrao is rooted in the assessment of their transgressions. Umrao's actions are primarily self-contained, whereas Suman's choices have far-reaching consequences, impacting not only her family, but also a wider circle of acquaintances. This differentiation is rooted in the concept of distinct categories of sin, with the latter category being considered more severe by the authors.

Rusva underscores the significance of refraining from causing harm to one's fellow human beings, contending that sins affecting others are of greater magnitude. Umrao's actions primarily affect herself, whereas Suman's choices result in widespread suffering among her family and those within her social milieu. This delineates the variation in how these two women are portrayed in the two novels, while simultaneously reflecting the authors' distinctive perspectives on society at large.

Wise men have divided sinners into two categories those whose deeds are limited to themselves and those whose acts affect other people as well. In my humble opinion, those in the first category are lesser and those in the second category are the greater sinners. Take to drink or worship idols; burn the Kaaba or the Koran. These the Lord might perhaps forgive, but not that you hurt a man.

(176)

She acknowledges this herself when she says: there is not another witch like me in this world. I have destroyed my family with my longing for pleasures. I am my father's murderer. I have put a knife to Shanta's throat.

(196)

In these powerful words, her self-awareness resonates with a profound feminist perspective. By acknowledging her unique identity as a woman, she confronts the societal expectations and restrictions placed upon her. Her declaration of being unlike any other "witch" challenges the stereotypes and conventional roles assigned to women. Moreover, her acknowledgment of the impact of her desires on her family and her role in Shanta's life reflects a feminist critique of the patriarchal structures that can shape women's lives. It is a stark reminder that women have historically been held accountable for desires and actions beyond their control, and this self-awareness signifies her recognition of the injustice inherent in such constraints. This moment in her narrative serves as a potent feminist statement, highlighting the need for women to assert their agency and challenge the societal norms that have for so long constrained their identities and choices.

Female Protagonists in “Sevasadan” and “Umrao Jan Ada” as Agents of Gendered Self-Representation

Suman in “Sevasadan”: Redefining Redemption

In the pages of "Sevasadan", Suman's story is a profound narrative of transformation and self-discovery, where her path to self-representation takes a spiritual and moral turn. She transcends her early materialistic desires and embarks on a quest for redemption and moral elevation. Suman's journey reveals the extraordinary capacity of women to reinvent themselves, even in the most challenging of circumstances. Her narrative teaches us that identity is not static, but can be redefined in pursuit of a higher purpose.

Umrao Jaan in “Umrao Jan Ada”: Mastering the Arts, Mastering Self-Representation

Umrao Jaan, on the other hand, is a woman of a different mold. Kidnapped as a child and thrust into the world of courtesans, she harnesses her skills in poetry, music, and dance to achieve recognition and

self-representation within her niche. Her life story serves as an inspiration to all women who seek to define their own narrative. Umrao Jaan's mastery of the arts mirrors her mastery of her self-representation, proving that women can shape their identities by actively participating in the creation of their own stories.

Parallels and Contrasts: Empowering Diversity in Self-Representation

While Suman and Umrao Jaan both challenge societal norms, their journeys differ, reflecting the diversity of women's experiences. Suman's transformation is a deeply spiritual one, driven by the quest for redemption and moral ascension, whereas Umrao Jaan's self-representation revolves around mastering the arts and achieving recognition within her social milieu. Their stories highlight that there is no singular path to self-representation, and women have the agency to redefine their identities in various ways, transcending societal expectations.

In the vibrant tapestry of contemporary discussions on women's self-representation and identity, the stories of Suman and Umrao Jaan continue to resonate. Women today, much like their predecessors, grapple with complex societal norms and multifaceted identities. These narratives serve as timeless sources of inspiration, prompting women to assert their own agency in defining their identities, defying societal constraints, and crafting narratives that are uniquely their own. Within the dynamic discourse surrounding women's self-representation and identity, the captivating tales of Suman and Umrao Jaan offer a thought-provoking perspective. They beckon us to consider that while contemporary women certainly grapple with multifaceted identities and societal norms, they also inherit the legacy of resilience and reinvention. What's truly remarkable is that, in addition to drawing inspiration from the past, we can foster a unique idea — that women today have the power not just to assert their own agency, but also to collaboratively reshape societal norms, fostering an environment where every woman can craft her distinct narrative without constraint, breaking new ground in the ongoing saga of women's self-expression.

In the realm of "Sevasadan" and "Umrao Jan Ada", Suman and Umrao Jaan transcend the boundaries of their eras to embody the spirit of resilient self-representation. Their stories, whether on the path of spiritual redemption or through the mastery of arts, capture the essence of women's remarkable ability to redefine themselves. In a world reluctant to grant them agency, these heroines break free, offering an enduring reminder of the endless possibilities of gendered self-representation. Their narratives remain timeless inspirations in the ongoing odyssey of women's identity and self-expression.

According to Judith Butler in her work "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity", she argues that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." Butler argues that gender identity is not an inherent or stable quality, but is performed through repeated actions and behaviours. She suggests that the concept of gender is a social construct, and individuals have agency in how they perform and represent their gender. This perspective resonates with the diverse ways in which Suman and Umrao Jaan redefined their identities in response to their respective circumstances.

For Suman, her transformation from a materialistic, high-caste Hindu woman to a person seeking spiritual redemption can be seen as a performative act of gendered self-representation. She actively constructs her identity based on her personal journey and pursuit of a higher moral purpose. This aligns with Butler's idea that individuals have the capacity to perform and represent their gender in ways that diverge from societal norms. In Umrao Jaan's case, her mastery of the arts and her recognition within her social setting also exemplify the performative nature of gender. She actively shapes her identity as a courtesan, who is not confined to the conventional roles assigned to women in her society. This aligns with Butler's notion that gender is a continuous process of self-representation and performance.

Furthermore, the reference to Butler's work can be used to accentuate the enduring relevance of the themes in “Sevasadan” and “Umrao Jan Ada” in contemporary discussions on women's self-representation. While it is true that Suman and Umrao Jaan actively performed and redefined their gendered identities, there are contemporary perspectives that argue women today face both continuity and change in their identity challenges. Some contend that while women are certainly challenging and reshaping their identities, they may still contend with persistent societal expectations that influence and even restrict the narratives they construct. This dual narrative highlights the ongoing complexities and nuances in the evolution of gender roles in the modern world.

The juxtaposition of Umrao Jan Adā and Bazar-e Husn or Sevasadan affords a nuanced examination of the societal position of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century India. These literary works serve as compelling lenses through which to scrutinize the pernicious implications of the prevailing dowry system and the caste hierarchy. Moreover, they issue trenchant critiques of the prevalent practice of consigning women to marriages with ill-suited partners, a nefarious scheme often perpetrated by either unscrupulous or desperate male relatives. In the backdrop of these narratives, the prevailing male-conceived archetype of the virtuous, chaste, pious, and self-sacrificing wife emerges, a figure exalted in theory, but frequently marginalized in practice by the very same male custodians of societal norms. It is within this complex milieu that the lives of courtesans are depicted over a temporal span of approximately eighty years, an endeavour that also chronicles the gradual erosion of their social status within the broader fabric of Indian society.

These works serve as a testament to the resilience and agency of women in negotiating their identities within a society that often sought to confine them to prescribed roles and expectations.

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