

Prostitution: An Imposition or Not?

With Reference to Premchand's Suman And Dostoevsky's Sonia

Reeta Suchita Tigga

Research Scholar

M.A. (Russian), JNU

New Delhi

India

Abstract

The prostitute and her profession has always been the subject of curiosity for humans. They are generally misjudged and are termed as characterless. However Premchand and Dostoevsky have elaborately addressed to this problem in their works. They have discussed the root of the problem and have tried to understand whether this profession was imposed on the women or they have willingly chosen it. Apart from this both the writers have a suggested a solution to this problem in the end of their novels.

“Yes, your path lies open before you, but you have cut off my return, and left me stripped naked before the world with its lidless eyes starring night and day.”¹

-Rabindranath Tagore

Women have always been described as epitome of love, affection, care and tenderness. But with all these qualities, it is this gender itself which has suffered the most. She is fallen by misfortune and is often compelled by the society to deviate from her path. Her suffering is always mute and is left unheard. Feodor Dostoevsky and Premchand have

¹ Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Gardener*. Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1913. p.52.
<http://www.spiritualbee.com/media/tagore-love-poems.pdf> Accessed: 29-11-2015

carefully crafted the character of such women in their novels. They both are aware of the painful life of the prostitutes and their troubled mental situation. They understand the sincerity of their love and therefore they have accepted their importance in the society.

Premchand realized the problems of the Indian women. He raised his voice against the social evils such as child marriage, bigamy, dowry and prostitution. In some of his stories he has depicted the pain and suffering of the prostitute and at the same time he has endowed them with high moral character.

In his novel *Sevasadan*, he has addressed to this problem of prostitution. He has touched various aspect related to prostitution in this novel. He believes that prostitution is related to other social issues and it is the society itself that is responsible for this problem. Suman is the main protagonist of this novel. Her father is a police inspector and is forced to take bribe so that to get her daughter married. However he is caught and is put in jail. Her mother had no option but to get Suman married to a much older man. Suman was not satisfied with her marriage. She soon realizes that her husband is poor and would be unable to provide her a comfortable life. She is jealous of Bholi, a prostitute, who stays near her house. Bholi has a very luxurious life and therefore Suman is attracted towards her. One day Gajadhar, her husband, throws her out of the house because she attended a dance and music show and has returned late at night. Suman had no choice but to take shelter at Bholi's house. And so she is forced into prostitution.

Premchand not only depicted the problem of prostitution but has tried to touch the various aspect related to prostitution. One of the characters in the novel, Kunwar Anurudh Singh says:

“Hamen veshyaaon ko patit samajhane kaa koe adhikaar naheen hai, yah hamaaree param dhrishtataa hai. Ham raat din jo rishvaten lete hain, sood khaate hain, deenon kaa rakt choosate hain, asahaayon kaa galaa kaatate hain, kadaapi is yogy naheen hain ki samaaj ke kisee ang ko neech yaa tuchchh samajhen. Sabase neech ham hain, sabase paapee, duraachaaree, anyaayee ham hain, jo apane ko shikshit, sabhy, udaar, sachchaa samajhate hain ! Hamaare shikshit bhaaiyon kee badaulat daalamndee aabaad hai, chauk men chahal-pahal hai, chakalon men raunak hai. Yah meenaa baazaar ham logon hee ne sajaayaa hai, ye chidiyaa ham logon ne hee pha.nsee hain, yah kathaputaliyaan hamane banaaee hain. Jis samaaj men atyaachaaree zameendaar, rishvatee raajy-karmachaaree, anyaayee mahaajan,

svaarthee bandhu aadar aur sammaan ke paatr hon, vahaan daalamandee kyon na aabaad ho?”²

[We have no right to understand the degeneration of the prostitute. This is completely our audacity. We cannot consider any section of the society as shallow because it is we, who, everyday accept bribe, suck the blood of the poor and cut the throat of the helpless. We ourselves are the most immoral, unjust and sinful as we consider ourselves to be the most educated, decent and honest. It is because of our educated friends that these markets are frequented by customers. We ourselves have set up this market. We have caught this bird. We have made these puppets. Then why would this market not flourish in a society where the oppressive landlords, corrupt government servants, unjust moneylenders and selfish friends are respected?]

This statement indicates that Premchand considered that all the problems that existed in the society were related to each other. He thought that the problem of prostitution could only be solved when the root of all the problems has been eradicated. And while searching for the solution to this problem, he emerges as a social reformer. In the novel, the members of the municipality play a significant role of deciding the fate of the prostitute. They pass a proposal in which the prostitutes were forbidden to enter the park. They were asked to settle in the outskirts of the city and heavy taxes were levied on the function where these prostitutes performed. They were also given the choice to get married within nine months or they could learn any handicraft for livelihood. Padam Singh, a member of the municipality, defends the proposal of the municipality. He says that the prostitutes are asked to settle outside the city so as to keep them away from the social evils and not because of any hatred. There they could live a respectable and healthy life. And finally Suman joins to serve a home that houses the children of the prostitutes. The home is named Sevasadan or the Abode of Service. With the establishment of Sevasadan, Premchand has given an ideal solution to the problem of prostitution.

Through this novel Premchand depicts that prostitution is directly or indirectly related to the social evils that existed in the society such as dowry, women illiteracy, unmatched marriages, religious intolerance and orthodoxy. Mahatma Gandhi too was concerned about this problem and therefore he wrote: “Prostitution, it is well known is largely due to two causes- the economic and the human. If we could raise the status of women afford them

² Premchand. *Sevasadan*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2005. p. 186.

honourable careers we would do more towards the lessening of the evil than by any number of laws. The human factor is more difficult to deal with, but everything that makes for social betterment and for equality between the sexes helps in the solution of the problem.”³

Dostoevsky also raises the same issue in his novel *Crime and Punishment* through the character of Sonia. Sonia is the daughter of Marmeladov. She has a step mother, Katerina Ivanovna and step sibling as well. It is Katerina who has driven her into the profession of prostitution. But this does not make her father innocent. Both mother and father are to be blamed for pushing Sonia into the trade and accepting her wages for their livelihood. Marmeladov is an unemployed, alcoholic and helpless father who has no other choice but to accept the wages of her daughter. If he was responsible father, then he would have worked and used his wages to feed his family. He does not stop his daughter to work as a prostitute despite of knowing that she would bring inevitable shame unto herself and that would torment her for lifetime. However in his death bed he asks for forgiveness from Sonia as he realizes the mistake he has committed as a father. She comforts her father as she believes in forgiveness and hope. And then he dies in her arms. It is here that Raskolnikov, the protagonist of the novel, sees Sonia for the first time: “She, too, was in rags, her attire was all of the cheapest, but it was decked out in a gutter finery of a special stamp, unmistakably betraying his shameful purpose... Sonia was small thin girl of eighteen, rather pretty, with fair hair and wonderful blue eyes.”⁴ Later he meets her when she comes to invite him to her father’s funeral. She appears as a “modestly and poorly dressed young girl, very young, indeed, almost like a child, with a modest and refined manner and with a candid but somewhat frightened looking face.”⁵ Raskolnikov makes her sit next to her mother and sister, despite of him considering her to be a criminal of immoral acts because her shame seems like humility. She appears to be modest and innocent. Raskolnikov relates to with her pain and unhappiness and therefore he is attracted towards her: “...there was such a kindness and simplicity in her expression that one could not help being attracted.”⁶

Raskolnikov has murdered a pawnbroker and her sister. The guilt of two murders constantly torments him. He thinks that it is only Sonia, to whom he can confess his crime and with her he can share his misery. Dostoevsky has endowed Sonia with admirable

³ *Selected Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1972, 2:15.

⁴ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr). London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000, p. 158

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

qualities. She is presented as a loving, forgiving and angelic person. She is a prostitute yet she retains her virtue. She is brave and patient. She finds her strength in God. Raskolnikov tries to test her faith towards God by saying that her step mother would die and she would not make enough money as a prostitute and then her younger siblings will be forced on the streets. To this Sonia answers: "...God will not let it be!"⁷ He constantly reminds her of the suffering of her life and about the futility of her sacrifice. But Sonia has immense faith in God and hopes that God would surely reward her for all her sufferings. He even calls her a 'holy fool', that upsets Sonia but her faith in God does not waver. And with this he realizes that it is she, to whom he can confess his crime and with her he can share his misery. He confesses to her about the murder to which she responded with acceptance and empathy for his pain. His confession and her loving acceptance are pivotal in the transformation of Raskolnikov. On hearing the confession she says to him: "Go at once, this very minute, stand at the crossroads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!' Then God will send you life again."⁸

Women were subordinate to men in Russia during the 1860s and Dostoevsky depicts this reality through the character of Sonia. Although she does not defend her dignity verbally but her silence is symbolic of the suppressed voice of women in Russia. Similarly Premchand has depicted the pain, agony and misery of the India women in his novel. Prostitution as a profession was imposed on these two characters by their society. For Sonia prostitution was the last resort to feed her family. The whole family – the father, the mother, and her siblings were entirely dependent on her wages. Whereas for Suman this profession was the only option for survival as she was left homeless. But it was not only her misfortune that pushed her into prostitution. The evils of the Indian society that existed in that time were equally responsible for her state. Premchand believed that: "... economic hardships and unemployment, coupled with the ill-treatment of women by the family and relatives, were factors that contributed to the growth of the evil practice."⁹

⁷Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr), p. 573

http://www.planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/Crime_and_Punishment_T.pdf Accessed:20-10-2015

⁸ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr). London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000, p. 354.

⁹ Pandey, Geetanjali. *How Equal? Women in Premchand's Writing*. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 21, No. 50 (Dec. 13, 1986). p. 2185. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4376441>. Accessed: 19-10-2015

Both Premchand and Dostoevsky have tried to give a solution to this problem. Premchand in the end of the novel has established a Sevasadan or the Abode of Service for the children of prostitutes. He has tried to bring about a social reformation and has worked for the upliftment of such women. On the other hand, Dostoevsky has approached the problem in a different way. He showed amazing courage in lending respectability to prostitutes and this is indicated when Raskolnikov has made Sonia sit beside his mother and sister: “It was evidently almost inconceivable to herself that she could sit down beside them.”¹⁰. Dostoevsky has bestowed Sonia with high moral character. He has made her a source of spiritual support to Raskolnikov. Both Sonia and Suman emerge as an extremely powerful character with great inner strength. Thus Dostoevsky and Premchand have made their character, Sonia and Suman, the emblem of virtue and have tried to restore their lost respect.

¹⁰Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr). London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000 . p.203.

Bibliography:

1. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr). London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000.
2. Premchand. *Sevasadan*. Allahabad: Saraswati Press, 1973.
3. Premchand. *Sevasadan*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2005.
4. Tondan, Pratapnarayan. *Premchand*. Delhi: Samayik Prakashan, 1969.
5. Kohli, Narendra. *Premchand*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1991.
6. Carroll, Clare. *The Plight of Prostitution: A Study of Sonia Marmeladov in Crime and Punishment*. 2014. http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/dostoevsky_2014/1. Accessed: 20-10-2015
7. Blake, Elizabeth. *Sonya, Silent No More: A Response to the Woman Question in Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment"*. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer, 2006), p. 252-271. American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20459250>. Accessed: 19-10-2015
8. Breger, Louis. *Crime and Punishment: A Psychoanalytic Reading*. Humanities Working Paper 73. California Institute of Technology, California. 1982. <http://authors.library.caltech.edu/15487/1/HumsWP-0073.pdf> Accessed: 20-10-2015
9. Paris, Bernard J., *Dostoevsky's Greatest Characters*. USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
10. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Constance Garnett (Tr), http://www.planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/Crime_and_Punishment_T.pdf Accessed: 20-10-2015
11. *Selected Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1972, 2:15
12. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Gardener*. Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1913. p.52. <http://www.spiritualbee.com/media/tagore-love-poems.pdf> Accessed: 29-11-2015
13. Pandey, Geetanjali. *How Equal? Women in Premchand's Writing*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 50 (Dec. 13, 1986). p. 2185. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4376441>. Accessed: 19-10-2015