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SPACE AND PERSONHOOD IN PREMCHAND'S "SEVASADAN AND NIRMALA"

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to examine city architecture and spaces within home in two of Premchand's novels in an attempt to contextualize certain processes in self-fashioning and production of subjectivities. Every society has prevalent ways of structuring, producing, and conceptualizing space that reflect its dominant ideologies and social order. In other words, spaces are a reflection of social reality. Both these novels document these changing spaces marked by a period of accelerated change. Both these novels, *Sevasadan and Nirmala*, in the process of narrating the "private in public", reveal a world shaped by a spatial economy which combines the social relations of reproduction with the relations of production. A knowledge of the spatio-temporal matrix which the characters inhabit, reveals the complex interrelation being formed between the exterior and the interior in a world in the first throes of modernity. The genre of the novel too, as a new form, offers an ideologically charged space, for the author to represent a world experiencing the formation of new socio-geographical settings.

KEY WORDS: Modernity, social space, personhood

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(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or 'ideal' about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh action to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others.

- Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (73).

Time & Space are Real Beings
Time is a Man Space is a Woman
- William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgement*
[(quoted in WJT Mitchell, *Iconology*, (95))]

Written in the early twentieth-century, Premchand's novels have constantly drawn merit for their depiction of momentous social and political changes that were taking place in the country at that time. As an "imaginative mediator" and a committed writer, he helped steer modern Hindi fiction away from exotic romances and

exemplary tales laden with moral didacticism towards more realistic modes of narrative representation.¹ The purpose of this paper is to examine through two of his novels, *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala*, these socio-political changes in terms of spaces, both institutionalized and symbolic; as practical contents and mental forms. Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space and its use in the production and maintenance of social relations will serve as the key reference point in looking at the novels and its characters, as every society has prevalent ways of structuring, producing, and conceptualizing space that reflect its dominant ideologies and social order. The physical and conceptual division between private/domestic and public spaces, for example, has been integral to the maintenance of the patriarchal social order; the difference between the rural and the urban is dependent not only on economic factors, but also because the spaces are governed by divergent ideological dimensions. Space, therefore, is fundamentally tied up with the production and continuance of social reality. It provides for a geographic naturalization of the social. Connected to this notion of social space is the idea of "personhood", as mentioned in the title, and refers to modes of self-substantiation through processes of signification that spaces acquire and inhabitants embody.

Sevasadan, one of his early novels, brings issues of the nation, women, social reform and the reordering of the cityscape together. Published in 1918 as an Urdu novella, *Bazaar-e-husn*, it traces the journey of Suman, a Hindu woman, from a life of sordid domesticity in the city of Banaras to becoming one of the most desired courtesans of the city, her consequent chastisement and the redemption of her virtue.² Her journey is mapped, not only through the inhabitation of various geographic spaces and locales in the city but also through symbolic ones, both in terms of the mytho-religious social imaginary and, the civil-political space of public life.

Transported from a relatively well-to-do home in the rural district, to a two-room dwelling in the inner bylanes of the city of Banaras, she suffers in a claustrophobic relationship with an elderly husband. Brought up in a household where each one of her whims was fulfilled, she finds the life in an impoverished household difficult. Though the author attributes her flighty and arrogant nature to an indulgent upbringing, he also uses this as an opportunity to criticize the custom of early marriage which places on women, responsibilities they are ill-equipped to handle.

The move to the city opens up for Suman a new network of spatial practices, around an unfamiliar and evolving set of familial and social relations. The lack of an "aangan" or inner courtyard, as prevalent in rural houses, denies her a space traditionally inhabited by women in contrast to the "dwar" or the threshold, a space associated with men. The "aangan" in North India is an open-to-sky space where women spend most of their time within the household and has traditionally been given to great emotional and affective investment. It provides them with a sense of mobility and freedom, albeit limited, as they undertake household chores without the interruption of men. As Suman's house is without a courtyard, she seeks to escape the dreary confines of the house by sitting at the doorway which becomes a matter of bitter contention between the couple. Gajadhar, the husband tries to procure a house with a courtyard but in spite of his efforts is unable to do so due to the high rents in the city. (23)

The presence of Bholi, the courtesan, who lives across the street from their house, is also an enigma for Suman. Reared with a belief in the absolute depravity and wickedness of prostitutes, she is surprised by the attention and respect Bholi garners from the "respectable" men of the city. Her attempts at earning spiritual capital through dips in the Ganga and reading of the Ramayana, for gaining moral elevation over Bholibai come to nought when she sees Bholibai performing at the temple for the Ramnavmi festival. To see her perform within the precincts of the temple and the sense of intoxication she seems to produce in her audience throws Suman's ethical compass awry causing her to drift.

¹ The term "imaginative mediator" is drawn from Harish Trivedi's preface to the English translation of Premchand's biography.

² It was later translated into Hindi and published as *Sevasadan* or, *The House of Service*.

“She is the epitome of respect and honour in god’s home, in this assembly of great men, and yet there isn’t even a place for me to sit anywhere in this temple.”(23)

Vasudha Dalmia, has noted the importance of courtesans in the city in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth-century. Banaras or Kashi, she notes, was at the pinnacle of all cities of the subcontinent with the courtesans situated at the top of this pinnacle. Not only did they exercise social power but also played a central role in most of the public occasions. It was a world, socially and ritually centred around the courtesans. Suman is witness to the power and influence they wield in the city at another occasion when she visits Beni Park. While she is mistreated and humiliated for sitting on the bench, the courtesans, who enter the park soon after, are treated with great deference. (26)

It is through the incident at the park that Suman comes to befriend Padamsingh and Subhadra and becomes a regular visitor in their household, which in turn triggers a series of events which would eventually, lead to her move out of home, to the Chauk. Seeing Bholi perform at Padamsingh’s house, as a part of the Holi festivities, and to celebrate his election as a member of the Municipal Council, raises questions in her mind and brings a fresh wave of dissatisfaction regarding her condition. Reflecting on her marital status, she compares it with prostitution as both are underlined by financial transactions though, prostitution seems to offer the woman with relatively greater freedom and social esteem:

Suman sat there for a long time deliberating over the cause and effect of these things. In the end, she concluded—she is free; there are shackles on my feet. Her warehouse is open, that’s why there is a crowd of customers; mine is closed, that’s why no one is standing in line. She doesn’t care whether or not the dogs bark about her, but I am afraid of what people will say and think. She can go outside of the purdah, while I am cloistered in it. She can swing freely on branches, while I have to hang on for dear life. This shame and this fear of derision have made me the servant of others.” (33)

It is her constant marginalisation from the social space; the gradual discovery of the operation of a value-system in the cityspace different from the one she had been raised to believe in; and the desire for comfort and appreciation which aggravate her discontent and lead to the violent exchange with her husband. Evicted from home, she has no choice but to seek shelter in Subhadra’s house. However, rumours of a putative relationship with her forces Padamsingh to ask her to leave in order to protect his reputation. With nowhere else to go, she is forced to seek refuge with Bholibai and soon becomes one of the most desired courtesans of Dalmandi, the bazaar of beauty. She is wooed by one and all including Sadansingh, Padamsingh’s nephew, for whom she develops great tenderness.

It is not long before Vithaldas, the zealous social reformer, seeks her out and urges her to give up the profession in the name of the *jati* or the Hindu nation. He evokes the name of the community to convince her. As a Brahmin woman it is her moral obligation to preserve the honour of the Hindu race and prevent, what he sees, as a crisis for the clan. At a period when social reform was an important part of the nationalist discourse, drawing connection between the domestic and the mytho-religious social was common and was evoked at the level of the individual, in terms of the non-secular and parochial notion of *dharma*. (Chakrabarty 25)

The highest form of personhood was one which was derived from self-sacrifice and service as Suman is soon made to realise. Her decision to give up prostitution transforms her from a powerful woman with considerable patronage to a helpless object of charity, a position she continues to occupy even when she begins living with her sister Shanta and Sadansingh. The attempt at self-abnegation as the purest form of self-substantiation in the figure of the reformed Suman is brought out most clearly towards the end in her physical description, where, having given up her love for expensive attire and trinkets, she is now unadorned and simply attired. A “lamp of purity” shines in her person than the beauty and elegance of earlier days. (269) As the caretaker of an institution for daughters of courtesans she seems to have finally found contentment. As a clear evidence of the complete transformation that she has undergone, she does not exult or seem to derive any satisfaction from her vocation but rather, chooses to exemplify Subhadra as the “jewel” of the community in the closing lines of the novel.

In her journey through the city, the imaginary and symbolic character of the spatial, as historically inscribed in social contexts, seem to affect her in ways that reveal different shades of her persona at each juncture. It has an effect not only on the way she is perceived by others but also in the way her subjectivity is shaped at various stages of her life. The greatest particularity of the social space is the indistinguishability of the mental aspect from the practico-sensory aspects of the physical space. (Lefebvre 27) Her need for self-affirmation which grows out of a desire for social recognition and wealth, later on transforms into a need to serve and it is in service (*seva*) that she finds true gratification. The title of the Hindi edition, *Sevasadan*, is drawn from the name of the home she runs but is also reflective of the service provided by the courtesans to their clientele. There is interplay of meaning as it also refers to her love for Sadan, while she was a courtesan and at a later stage, which can be referred to as her third dislocation, where she offers herself up completely in the service of her sister and Sadan, who is her brother-in-law now. The changes in her life are brought about by the decisions she makes at various junctures but are also a product of the socio-historical changes taking over the city of Banaras at that time under colonial rule.

The restructuring and modernizing of the city which forms a crucial part of the narrative and plot, is a result of a range of factors that had been brought together at that point in social history. The rise of a new class of professionals and, their increasing clout as stakeholders in the governance of the city were of crucial importance in bringing in the changes as were other factors such as social reform within the larger nationalist struggle. The new powers bestowed on the local government by the colonial government made it possible for the members and officials to take decisions for civic planning. The decision to ask the courtesans to leave the Chauk as a part of social reform is indicative of the socio-spatial segregation that was taking place at that time as social structures were changing with the coming of the “new professionals” represented here by Padamsingh but also others like Pandit Prabhakar Rao and Vithaldas. The landed aristocracy, represented most clearly by Kunwar Aniruddh Singh, under whose patronage the courtesans as practitioners of art forms thrived was being replaced by the “respectable” middle class with its own codes of morality. These changes in city planning make transparent the concept of a spatial code operative in the city. Dalmandi, the Bazaar of beauty has arisen out of spatial practices of the inhabitants of the city. However, this is now sought to be changed not only for the prevention of degeneration of young men easily exposed to the wiles of these women as they enter the Chauk, the focal point in the city, but also for the reform and upliftment of the women themselves. However, the move to bring in change is made difficult as the debate gets communalised. The existence of factions in local governance, is indicative of the vested interests of the different communities in the city and friction is produced in efforts made to protect them. Though predominantly, a debate between the dominant religious factions, the factions themselves are further subdivided in terms of class and position. The commercial and political interests are of central concern to the groups and even, gain prominence over the welfare of the courtesans. After, many acrimonious debates and falterings, the proposition is passed by the council allowing for the settlement of the courtesans in the outskirts of the city.

Suman’s decision to give up the profession earlier and move into a widows home, charts a different path of redemption for her from the other courtesans. Her recovery is also made possible because though a “fallen” woman, her decision to sexually abstain in her role as a courtesan implies a safeguarding of her virtue in a patriarchal society which lays great premium on inscribing codes of honour on women’s bodies. A repudiation of sexual desire, especially on the part of the woman and ascribing to self-imposed codes of asexuality has been a potent symbol in the cultural imagination of the nation and was to gain greater currency as the winds of national struggle swept the country. The figure of the “silent sufferer” or the “angelic victim” as Alok Rai calls her is not limited to Suman alone. Shanta, her sister, too, endures silently, all hardships that come her way once her marriage with Sadan is called off due to the discovery of her relation with Suman. However, it is in the figure of Nirmala, the character from Premchand’s eponymous novel, that it attains a certain kind of apotheosis; as the one “wronged but unharmed”; in need of salvation and deserving one.

Originally brought out in a serialized form, as a part of a woman’s journal, the novel, *Nirmala*, was published in 1927. It gained instant popularity and boosted the sales of the journal, *Chand*. The narrative

revolves around the character of Nirmala, a young woman married to an elderly widower with three sons. Caught in a complex situation where desire, guilt and suspicion, aggravate the situation to such an extent that the entire family falls apart, it is Nirmala's reticence which seems to be responsible for the disintegration of the family. Though, Nirmala on her part tries her best to save the situation each time.

"Despite all my care and caution the blame has finally fallen on me!" (163)

As the second wife, Nirmala already feels hemmed in when she enters the household. With a domineering sister-in-law who does not wish for her hold on the family to be undermined, she finds herself lost with no assailable role to play at hand. Towards the end of Chapter five, she consciously chooses to devote herself to the upbringing of the children. This decision to adopt the maternal role is a product of the socio-historical baggage associated with the space of the household and the gendered division of labour within it. Lefebvre has written critically of the obscuring of the materiality of space and the social relations of production in the discussion of domestic space by writers like Bachelard. (94) Confining women within domesticity, naturalizes their labour and erases their individuality. It turns them into "ghostly figure of desire [with] no place to occupy in the social order." It erases their suffering and even, eulogizes their drudgery.

However, the adoption of the role does not bring peace in the household. Her inability to feel any sexual attraction towards a man her father's age and, a natural affinity that she feels towards the eldest son, Mansaram because they are relatively of the same age causes Totaram to develop suspicions regarding them. In order to allay his fears, she begins confining herself to her own room and stops taking the lessons in English from Mansaram as she was earlier. She begins devoting greater time and attention to Totaram's needs but has to now hear jibes about her neglect of the children. Typecast, as the evil step-mother, she is allowed no room for individual action which induces passivity.

"If I've ever said anything to him, may my tongue fall off. Of course, as a step-mother all kinds of blame attaches to me by rights. I beg you, please ask him to come in." (77)

It is only after the loss of the first two sons, that she decides to take the reins of the household into her own hands but the overwhelming anxiety for the future makes her insensitive to the needs of the remaining members of the family and leads to further loss and bereavement. While, Nirmala unlike Suman remains firmly located within the domestic space, she is by no means insulated from the network of prevalent social practices as is evident in her life journey through the novel. In contrast to Bachelard's phenomenological study of the home as a "felicitous space", the domestic household as portrayed in *Nirmala*, brings to the fore the "lived" aspect of spatial experience, which due to its corporal nature has the capacity to incarnate into the realm of consciousness. The home in the novel is indicative of the ambiguous continuity of social spaces, where the space of the room or the house though cut off due to barriers or walls and other signs of private property, still remains a part of the very same social space. (Lefebvre 87)

Both these novels, *Sevasadan* and *Nirmala*, in the process of narrating the "private in public", reveal a world shaped by a spatial economy which combines the social relations of reproduction with the relations of production. A knowledge of the spatio-temporal matrix which the characters inhabit, reveals the complex interrelation being formed between the exterior and the interior in a world in the first throes of modernity. The genre of the novel too, as a new form, offers an ideologically charged space, for the author to represent a world experiencing the formation of new socio-geographical settings. Instead of the placing of the woman in an ahistorical, abstract location devoid of temporality as visible in Blake's quote at the beginning of the paper, these spatial lines of interpretation reveal the processes of naturalization that make such an ahistorical reading not only possible but historically necessary.

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