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**A Life of the ‘Other’ and a Story of the ‘Self’:
Shivarani Devi in *Premchand ghar mē***

SUMMARY: This paper will deal with Shivarani Devi’s (1890–1976) *Premchand ghar mē*, a literary memoir-cum-biography of her husband Premchand, a pioneer of Hindi literature. The book has already been extensively discussed in previous studies as a mirror held up to Premchand, revealing all his dynamism as a writer, intellectual and householder. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to delve more deeply into Shivarani Devi’s own intimate space within the household. It will discuss the ‘self’ that Shivarani Devi necessarily lays bare while portraying her husband, the ‘other’. It will analyse the narrated self of Shivarani Devi within the domesticity that she defines as *ghar*.

KEYWORDS: Hindi autobiography, Shivarani Devi, Premchand, *Premchand ghar mē*, self-image, Women’s Studies, Indian women’s autobiography, 20th century Indian women

Introduction

In 1944, eight years after the death of the literary intellectual Premchand,¹ his wife Shivarani Devi penned a book, *Premchand ghar mē* (‘Premchand at home’), with the aim of reintroducing her husband and illuminating his personality through accounts of his private life. Scholarship on Premchand in India and abroad has produced a rich corpus of studies. The work under discussion, while more a literary work than a scholarly one, has been accorded special attention for the important

¹ Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) was a pioneer of Indian fiction who wrote in the realist tradition, thematizing the poor and urban middle classes and the social issues they faced. He was strongly influenced by Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement.

role it has played in cementing the picture of Premchand as an understanding and respectful husband within the domestic sphere shared with his wife, and in describing the circumstances in which he wrote. But much less attention has been paid to it as a literary witness to the writer herself.

Among the very few works on Shivarani Devi, Jyoti Atwal's article credits her contributions to the literary, social and political milieu of India in the first half of the twentieth century. She recognizes the strong sense of autobiography in *Premchand ghar mē* (Atwal 2007: 1631): "[It] settles and unsettles the feminine self within the domesticity, tradition, and reformism of the time....". Atwal focuses on Shivarani Devi's participation in and opinions on current politics, including the nationalist struggle and reformism. Alongside Atwal's, my article examines the memoir as an autobiography in a wider sense. I consider how Shivarani Devi constructs her 'self' while writing about her husband, the 'other'. To what extent was she in fact consciously doing so? How does she define what it means to be a woman? What social status did Indian society offer to women during her time? How is such status looked upon by Shivarani Devi herself? How does she present herself in her writing? What kind of space was she able to create for herself in her own domestic setting? How does she mark out a 'self' while telling about the 'other'; what kind of self-image can be inferred by readers? This article will try to answer such questions raised by *Premchand ghar mē*. Before getting down to the main analysis, however, I present an overview of the history of Hindi autobiography and situate *Premchand ghar mē* within it.

A historical survey of Hindi autobiography and *Premchand ghar mē*

Premchand ghar mē is not Shivarani Devi's first first-person narrative. She was already the author of a personal narrative published in 1932, in an autobiographical issue of *Ham's*. In the first half of the twentieth century, up until around 1944,¹ when Shivarani Devi's

¹ First published by Sarasvati Press, Banaras in 1944. The first edition is available online under: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.538715> (last accessed: 20.08.2018).

Premchand ghar mē was published, the autobiographies of “common people” were not widespread in South Asia, though autobiography itself was not something unknown. Women’s autobiographies in particular are a fairly recent phenomenon in Hindi literature, a sudden rise in their number occurring only in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Despite this growth, men still outnumber women within the genre (Browarczyk 2013: 289). Therefore, among the few personal narratives composed by South Asian women, particularly the ones with links to Hindi literature, this narration is an important one.

The January–February 1932 issue of *Hamś*,² devoted to autobiography, was an important milestone in the history of such works in Hindi. The editor of the journal, Shivarani Devi’s husband Premchand, had requested both established and young writers to contribute to it. Until that time life histories or autobiographies tended to have great or at least famous persons—be they kings, saints, scholars, or warriors—as their subjects. Autobiography was regarded as a kind of moral tale, from which people could learn valuable lessons to apply to their own lives, but Premchand reformed all that by inviting common people within the fold of subjects. The issue of *Hamś* marked a turning point in how biography and autobiography were viewed among the Indian reading public. For Premchand, all humans, even the sweeper who worked in his house, acquire insights during their lives which can enlighten others (Chudal 2016).

Shivarani Devi and Premchand each published a first-person narrative in the autobiographical issue of *Hamś*. Premchand summarises large portions of his life, but Shivarani Devi focuses on a few days she spent in an Indian prison. She includes, if not verbatim, this account in her later *Premchand ghar mē*. We can say with confidence that Shivarani Devi’s contribution to *Hamś* was her first piece of writing about herself. Later she published many short stories in Hindi before returning to and completing the autobiographical writing she had started in 1932. Her memoir of 1932 leaves readers with the impression

² A literary-political magazine launched by Premchand in 1930, it still comes out as a monthly Hindi literary magazine restarted by Rājendra Yādv.

of a courageous woman fighting for her country's independence. When I compare her narration in 1932 and her later book, the confidence of the narrating I—the power of her voice—has not changed.

The eventual success of the autobiographical issue by Premchand helped to open up the door to autobiography for everyone who could write in Hindi. The autobiographical issue of *Hamis* featured 52 items, either short autobiographical sketches or poems. They included contributions by four women writers: Shivrani Devi, Yashoda Devi, Dinesh Nandini, and Rameshvari Devi. The first two wrote sketches; the third and fourth, poems. Yashoda Devi, for instance, writes about her experience of child marriage and emphasises the importance of educating girls about married life before they leave home.

Premchand ghar mẽ

I am interested in *Premchand ghar mẽ* not only because it tells us things about Premchand's life that are not told elsewhere or because it is written by a woman, but also because it testifies to one woman's growing literary awareness. As I read it, I looked to see how Shivarani Devi portrays her presence in Premchand's life, how her own sense of self grows, and how she acts to strengthen that sense. An Indian woman's desire to create a self-identity acknowledged beyond the walls of her house, and the actions undertaken in that regard, were not things that met with ready acceptance during that time and place.

Here I may briefly compare Shivarani Devi's biographical work with one written by the wife of another contemporary Hindi writer, Rahul Sankrityayan. The latter's autobiography, *Merī jīvan yātrā*, which is much longer than *Premchand ghar mẽ*, was started by Sankrityayan but completed by his wife, Kamala Sankrityayan (Chudal 2016: 49). Still, certain similarities are shared by the two works. Both are aimed at cementing, or even increasing, the public stature of their subjects. For all that she herself is a crucial presence in her work, Shivrani Devi clearly states that her aim in writing is to tell not about herself but about the renowned Premchand. By doing this she will be fulfilling her duty as a wife and at the same time be comforted:

My being able to present this book to readers gives me the same satisfaction one gets by fulfilling one's duty. Unlike most biographies, the objective in writing this book has not been to spread the fame of [its subject,] that great soul. You will find domestic memories in this book, but these memories have a literary value, because through them one becomes acquainted with the personality of that great literary figure. This book aims to convey how great and magnanimous that person was also in human terms. (Premchand 2012: 13)³

She goes on to say that she was intent on setting pen to paper honestly and truthfully; that she neither had time to embellish things nor the audacity to do so. Her ultimate goal in writing about her husband's life was a search for peace. She felt sad when recalling the past, and turned to writing down her recollections in order to come to terms with it (Premchand 2012: 42).

Kamala Sankrityayan writes in a very similar vein:

By writing this book I have tried to complete the life story of [its subject], that great man—a responsibility he had entrusted to me. (Sankrityayan 1998: 289–290)⁴

Both narrators, Kamala Sankrityayan and Shivarani Devi, define their action of writing as a duty (*dāyitva* or *kartavya*) towards their husbands, whom they call respectively a *mahāpuruṣ* (great man) and *mahān ātmā* (great soul). This clarification of the two women writers takes us back to the same 1932 turning point in the history of Hindi autobiography when Premchand attempted to reform it by taking it to the common people and even women through the *Hamis* autobiographical issue.

³ *pāṭhkō ke sāmne is pustak ko rakhte hue mujhe vahī sukh anubhav ho rahā hai jo kisī vyakti ko apnā kartavya pūrā karne se hotā hai. is pustak ko likhne kā uddeśya us mahān ātmā kī kīrti phailānā nahī hai, jaisā ki adhikāś jīvaniyō kā hotā hai. is pustak mē āpko gharelū saṁsmaraṇ milēge par in saṁsmaraṇō kā sāhityik mūlyā bhī is dṛṣṭi se hai ki inse us mahān sāhityik ke vyaktitv kā paricay miltā hai. mānavtā kī dṛṣṭi se bhī vah vyakti kitnā mahān, kitnā viśāl thā, yahī batānā is pustak kā uddeśya hai.* All translations from Hindi into English in this article are by the author.

⁴ *yah granth likhkar maīne un mahāpuruṣ kī apūrṇ jīvan-kathā ko pūrā karne kā prayās kiyā hai, jiskā dāyitva ve mujhe saūp gaye the.*

Why did Shivarani Devi write *Premchand ghar mẽ*? Why not her own story? This is a crucial question to ask before getting into the biography of her husband. It could be that she was not confident that her own life story would interest readers or the publisher. This supposition is supported in the foreword, where the strong confidence of the main text is not felt to the same extent.

She starts at Premchand's birth: "*āpkā janm ...*" ("He⁵ was born ..."), thus addressing him directly with what is normally the second person high respect pronoun *āp* but which can also be used exceptionally with a similar meaning for the third person. Later on, starting at the end of the first paragraph, she refers to him briefly with a more common (if still honorific) third person pronoun (a shift that will recur from time to time throughout), before turning over the narration to him to recite a story in the first person. Premchand's narrating I continues in this manner for seven chapters. From the eighth chapter, titled "*Śivrānī*", the narrating I shifts back to Shivarani Devi and remains with her until the end, with Premchand being presented henceforth, as at the beginning, through third person pronouns. The work has altogether 88 very short independent chapters. A chronological sequence of incidents is roughly maintained, but sometimes segments are repeated.

Thus, for the most part, Shivarani Devi views Premchand through her own eyes in the first person. It is the narration of a wife remembering the portion of her life spent with her husband. And all the while the narrating I in the book, for all its concentrating on exposing the character of Premchand, is revealing much about itself as well. She presents Premchand as a loving and caring husband genuinely interested in his wife's welfare and as an unfailingly attentive listener to what she has

⁵ This is the reading of the 1944 edition. In the 2005 and 2012 editions (the only modern ones I have seen), the first *āp* has been replaced with "Premchand." The earlier form, I assume, was due to the tradition of a wife not uttering her husband's name. It may have been the editors who made this change after her death (on 5 December 1976). It seems in any case to be the only such one in the whole text.

to say. Such considerateness extends to wider circles. He is in short a good husband, a good father, a good grandfather, and a good citizen, not to mention a good writer. But, as intimated in the title, the narrative of Premchand's life is largely limited to the narrower household. To be sure, the author writes what she knows about the challenges her husband faced in the outside world and how he went about solving them, but this is all seen from the perspective of how such experiences were talked over and digested at home with one another, with her in the role of confidante. Therefore, she is a presence, whether a more active or passive one, in every recounted incident after 1905 in her subject's life. Indeed, Shivarani Devi comes to share the protagonist's role in Premchand's life story. There are, in other words, two main characters in the biography: a first person *maĩ* (I, Shivarani Devi) and a second-cum-third person *āp* (he-you, Premchand). The account of their intertwined life starts with their marriage and ends with Premchand's death, leaving the narrating I alone in the world. The strong opinions, feelings, and emotions that are spiritedly and cogently expressed in the husband-wife discussions on various social, literary, and family matters stand as preludes leading convincingly towards the sense of loss at the end.

The phrase *ghar mẽ* in the title of Shivarani Devi's book marks out the book's setting as within the domestic arena, which would be normal for a woman of her time. But still, within those narrow confines, she defines herself as the ruler of that space, which forms a background against which her strong "self" is able to assert itself and lead a dignified life. She presents herself honestly as uncomfortable under anyone's control—as a forceful and self-willed woman. She specifies the point where she gains the upper hand:

He said to me "Trust me, I have surrendered myself to you."

From then on I indeed started ruling over him. (Premchand 2012: 33)⁶

What does she mean by "ruling" here? How does she characterize her rule? What kind of power did she want to exert, and how did she

⁶ *mujhse bole—“sac māno, maĩne apne ko tumhẽ saũp diyā hai.”/ tab se maĩ vākaĩ unpar śāsan karne lagĩ.*

measure her success? Ruling can mean simply having gained entry into someone's heart and consequently a lover's measure of control over the other's actions. It was in this sense, as subsequent events show, that Shivarani Devi could claim rulership in her domain. It was a domain, importantly, that was not only limited to conventional domesticity; her *ghar* was the place where Premchand decided on everything he did outside its walls. Therein she played the trusted advisor to him:

He highly respected my opinion. He did nothing in his life without my counsel. (Ibid. 2012: 61)⁷

Given her high self-confidence, she was soon venturing beyond the household, there asserting herself as a writer, and even more so as a political activist.

The Self and Self-image of Shivarani Devi

In *Premchand ghar mẽ*, Shivarani Devi devotes the chapter titled “Śivrānī” to introducing herself in the first person. She starts her account at her first marriage at the age of 11, three or four months after which she became a widow. Her father Munshi Devi Prasad was not happy with the turn of events, and after consulting a few pundits he wrote a tract called *Kāyasth bāl vidhvā uddhārak pustikā* (‘A booklet on the welfare of Kayastha child widows’) and published an announcement seeking interested new suitors (Atwal 2007: 1632). Premchand, unsatisfied with his first marriage, came across it and responded. Munshi Devi Prasad invited him to talk matters over, found that he liked him, and together they fixed the wedding date.

Neither did Shivarani Devi's father ask his daughter if she wanted to remarry, nor did Premchand ask permission from his stepmother or his first wife to enter into a second bond. Following marriage at the age of fourteen, Shivarani Devi at first felt uncomfortable in her new surroundings. She had lost her mother and was worried about her youngest brother, aged five. Therefore she spent most of her time at

⁷ *merī bātō ko ve bahut mahattva dete the. apne jīvan mẽ koī bhī kām unhōne merī salāh ke binā nahī kiyā.*

her parental house looking after him. She writes that the argumentative nature of Premchand's stepmother and the fact that Premchand was submissive to her did not create a helpful environment. Things got so bad that after eight years of marriage, when she was twenty-two, Premchand stopped letting her go to her natal home even at the invitation of her father, and a long quarrel ensued. For a while Shivarani Devi ignored her husband's wishes, and they continually argued. Premchand twice slapped her in the face. Shivarani Devi took this physical violence seriously and discussed further and indirectly asked for an explanation in later conversation. Shivarani does not present herself as a weak woman. She (Premchand 2012: 32) rather says "*maĩ uddand̄ thī*" (I was rebellious). Finally, he underwent a change of heart and expressed a strong desire that she would create a space for herself and take a leading role in family affairs. She agreed to do so. This was a major turning point in both their lives. For her it meant having gained the respect she felt she deserved, and thus her own self-respect.

Shivarani Devi went on to participate in the political struggle and at one point was imprisoned. Having achieved respect for herself at home, she ceased to be merely a housemaker and set out in search of a self-identity of her own beyond the hearth, something she felt she had to do without the help of her husband. In none of her activities as a writer and as a political or social activist did she inform her husband what she was up to.

The writer

By 1913—fairly early on, that is—Shivarani Devi began to feel drawn to writing as a result of continually seeing her husband engaged in such activity, but at first she was unsure of herself and repeatedly tore up whatever she wrote. She often suggested interesting plots to her husband, who wrote some of them up into narratives. After much practice in secret she completed a story of her own she was satisfied enough with to send to a women's periodical, *Cā̄d*.⁸ The story was called *Sāhas*

⁸ Its first issue was published in 1922 by Ramrakh Singh Sahgal and his wife Vidyavati Devi. The magazine survived into the 1940s.

(‘Courage’), a literary attack on the role of men in society. Premchand teased her when he discovered it, saying, “Now you, too, have become a story writer. I saw this in the office. My colleagues laughed after reading it. Many suspected me [of having written it myself]” (ibid.: 41). After this incident she started showing him what she wrote. This is how she became a self-taught writer who went on to produce many stories that thematize nationalism and the inequality practised within Indian society. Besides her autobiographical writing published in *Haris* and *Premchand ghar mẽ*, two collections of her stories came out under the titles *Nārī hṛday* (‘A woman’s heart’, 1932) and *Kaumudī* (‘Moonlight’, 1937). Aware of potential criticism, she consciously avoided trying to appear to be influenced by her husband’s writing (ibid.).⁹

There is an incident in her life that shows particularly forcefully her strong desire for an identity of her own. Once Premchand brought home a book written by Annie Besant. Shivarani Devi wanted to read it, but Premchand put her off, saying that it was beyond her reach. For six months every day she read the book on the sly as if it were the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and learnt each word by heart. Afterwards she put the book in her husband’s hands and requested him to test her on it (ibid.).

Shivarani Devi writes that her interest in literature and writing started when the couple were living in Mahoba, where Premchand had been posted as a Sub-Inspector¹⁰ of schools. There he read his stories to her and translated news that appeared in English-language papers. He wrote in the morning and went to the site during the day. She used her free afternoon time for reading and teaching herself the elements of story writing (ibid.: 40–41). The trial stories she wrote and destroyed finally bore fruit in 1924 with the publication of the story *Sāhas* in *Cāṁd* mentioned above.

⁹ [...]yah xayāl mujhe zarūr rahtā ki kahī merī kahānī unke anukaraṅ par na jā rahī ho. kyōki māi lokāpavād se ḍartī thī. (“The thought certainly stayed with me that my stories should not imitate his. For I was afraid of belittlement.”).

¹⁰ The Sub-Inspector of schools remains in charge of inspecting the schools in his circle. In other words he is the academic supervisor.

She recalls that Premchand was happy to see his stories being translated into other languages, but that both got upset when there was a call for a new story from either of them. At such times they both spent sleepless nights in search of a plot. At the outset, though, Premchand expressed open criticism about her following in his footsteps, to which she responded that it was beyond her control:

He said: 'Why have you made a load of trouble for yourself? You were living comfortably, but now you've created an unnecessary headache.'

I said: '[And] you haven't made a load of trouble [for yourself]?! I only write sometimes, [but] you have made it a profession.'

He said: 'Why, then, have you begun to copy this [sort of thing]?'

I said: 'It's my wish! I'm compelled to. What [else] should a person put their emotions into?' (Ibid.: 42)¹¹

The woman

One thing Shivarani Devi realized in her conscious struggle for self-identity and self-respect was that her quest presupposed fighting for all women's rights. It is a topic that she often discussed with her husband and writes about in her works. Recalling one such discussion she had with Premchand after a courageous speech she delivered on the problem of C-class prisoners¹² from the stage of a Congress party meeting in 1931 (at a time when the party was banned), she writes:

[...] 'you're doing your part through literature. You're not sitting idly by. What shall I do just sitting at home? When you're sitting at home you're doing other necessary things. You want to take all the glory?'

'When it comes time for glory to be handed out, I'll give it all to you.'

¹¹ *ve kahte—'tumne kyā apne lie balā mol le lī? ārām se rahtī thī, ab fizūl kī ek jhāñjhat kharīd lī. / māī kahtī—āpne nahī balā mol le lī! māī to kabhī-kabhī likhtī hū, āpne to apnā peśā banā rakhā hai. / āp bolte—'to uskī nakal tum kyō karne lagī? / māī kahtī—'hamārī icchā! māī majbūr hū. ādmī apne bhāvō ko kahā rakhe?'*

¹² Prisoners were classified into A, B, and C classes. A and B inmates were persons who by social status, education, or way of life were accustomed to a high standard of living. Poor, uneducated, or low-caste persons—those who could show no reason to be assigned to class A or B—were put into Class C.

I said, ‘How generous of you! The hearts of women are such that they hide themselves away while working. Let us bear the children, let us bear the pain; the fame goes to you.’(Ibid.: 159)¹³

Shivarani terms such exchanges battles of wit (*vinod*), and one can argue that for her they represented one means of forming a self-identity.

This dialogue clearly shows that Shivarani Devi wanted to break out from behind the walls of her house and create a space of her own in society, whether through social service or writing. One problem she addressed was prostitution, which occasioned the following remarks:

The Lord has given men the responsibility for women. They can do whatever they want. I do not understand at all why the Almighty gives birth to women? What kind of pleasure they get by coming into the world I do not understand. Perhaps they come into the world to be crushed under men’s feet. And always they serve them. If I had the power, I would only take women out of the world. Where there is no bamboo, there is no flute playing. (Ibid.: 160)¹⁴

Furthermore,

This kind of society needs to be destroyed. I have no idea if there is a God or not. If there is, how can he look upon all this injustice? Or maybe he, too, is nothing else but a man. (Ibid.: 161)¹⁵

¹³ [...] ‘*āp sāhitya ke zariye apnā kām kar hī rahe hai. xāmoś thoṛe hī baiṭhe hai. māī ghar mẽ baiṭhī-baiṭhī kyā karū? āp ghar mẽ baiṭhkar aur zarūrī kām kar rahe hai. sab yaś āp hī le lēge?*’

‘*jab kabhī yaś bāṭne lagegā to sab tumhē de dūgā.*’

māī bolī—‘baṛe dānī āp rahē! aisā dil to striyō ko milā hai ki kām karke chip jātī hai. bacce hamē hō, taklīf ham bhogē. nām āpkā ho.’

¹⁴ *īśvar ne puruṣō ko striyō kī zimmedārī dī hai. ve cāhe jo kar sakte hai. merī samajh mẽ bilkul nahī ātā ki parmātmā striyō ko kyō janam detā hai. duniyā mẽ ākar ve kyā sukh uṭhātī hai, merī samajh mẽ nahī ātā. śāyad puruṣō ke pairō tale raūde jāne ke lie hī ve saṃsār mẽ ātī hai. aur hameśā unhī sabkī ve sevā bhī kartī hai. agar merā vaś hotā to māī strī mātra ko saṃsār se alag kar detī. na rahtā bās na bajtī bāsurī.*

¹⁵ *aise samāj ko xatm kar denā cāhie. mālūm nahī bhagvān hai ki nahī? hai to aise atyācār kaise dekhtā hai? aur phir vah bhī to śāyad puruṣ hī hai.*

Shivarani Devi mentions that she encouraged not only Premchand but others as well to write about social issues and problems. She remembers one article published under the title “*Ājkal hamārī deviyā̃ kidhar ja rahī hai?*” (‘Whither are our women heading?’). She was very upset by it and wanted to write something in response, but when Premchand discouraged her, she requested someone else to do so instead. Later, when the reply was published as an article in *Mādhurī*, it was praised by many and was rewarded with a prize (ibid.: 164–165).

She describes herself as a pragmatist but very introverted (ibid.: 168). Her paeans to self-confidence were in part obviously for her own benefit—words to coax herself out of her shell; she was sure that for all the help one may have from the outside one must in the end help oneself (ibid.: 192). She supported the idea of women working outside the home and earning for themselves to gain self-respect and social standing (ibid.: 217–218). This notion of the working woman was indeed a most progressive one for the time. Shivarani was not ready to accept women as passive (*nirīh*) creatures—a trait that, she writes, has not to do with gender so much as with situations (ibid.: 223).

The freedom fighter

The period of Shivarani Devi’s youth was the age of nationalism in India, the peak time of the independence movement. Premchand participated in the movement through his pen. In 1920 he left his permanent government job as a Sub-Inspector following a decision made together with his wife, in response to Gandhi’s call for non-cooperation. Shivarani herself plunged into the freedom movement by becoming a member of the Congress Party. Gradually she recruited 700 new members and was given a captaincy. The strong influence Gandhian philosophy had on her comes through in her firm recommendation to Premchand to leave his job. Though they faced financial problems and the decision would make their life difficult in other ways, she based her recommendation on the knowledge that her husband was suffering from no acute illness and could well risk devoting his life to the freedom struggle. She was, moreover, confident that if he died during it she would still be able to survive without a salary.

Shivarani Devi actively participated in the civil disobedience campaign in Lucknow, which got underway in 1929. She did so without informing her husband and from the perch of her home. She strictly instructed journalists and colleagues that her name should not be made public, so that her husband would not find out. Moreover, she did not wish to be put in the spotlight alone, since there were many other women working with her. She was not in good health at the time, suffering from fever at night (ibid.: 142). After her husband had gone to the office and both her sons had been sent off to school, she plunged into political activity. She would set out with a team of women comrades on missions for the Indian National Congress, attending a minimum of two community meetings a day and giving speeches (ibid.: 147). As the chosen leader of the group, she thus helped to organize other women volunteers in the city. Being sent to jail for the cause was considered a mark of honour, and while Premchand was more than willing to face that prospect; his wife was intent on standing in for him. Swarup Rani Nehru, the mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, was in the forefront of the civil disobedience movement in the United Provinces, and in 1930 she visited Lucknow. Shivarani Devi went to listen to a speech she gave. By now most of the renowned leaders of the movement were in jail. It was a speech that motivated Shivarani Devi to devote herself all the harder to the movement. Indeed, she was arrested on 11 November 1931 and sentenced to two months imprisonment. Premchand writes to his nephew in this regard:

I saw her yesterday in prison and found her cheerful as ever. She has left us all behind and I now appear smaller in my own eyes. She has gone up a hundred-fold in my esteem. But until she comes and relieves me, I shall have to bear the burden of running the household.¹⁶

Conclusion

In penning her memoir, Shivarani Devi aimed to cast light on her husband's private life, which necessarily implied casting light at

¹⁶ Cited in: Menon 2003: 90.

the same time on her own. The question arises whether she shared the conviction expressed by her husband to Nanda Dulare Bajpeyi that an ordinary person's life can be enlightening and worth writing about. Whether or not she saw herself as among the *aire-gaire* ('any Tom, Dick, or Harry'), the fact was, in very virtue of being Premchand's wife, that she was no ordinary person. Still, any biography of her would have had a hard time keeping her out of the shadow of her husband. It is quite likely that Shivarani Devi's publishers specifically wanted her to write a book centred on him rather on herself, but what they in fact got was a work that is equally, if not more, centred on her. *Premchand ghar mē* starts off by giving Premchand the first word, but it soon shifts to Shivarani Devi's exposition of their relationship, during which Premchand has to ride pillion, so to speak. The very fact that she was writing at all in a country where there was not a tradition of writing autobiography, and especially not among women, much attention would necessarily have been paid to how she went about the task. For her to have taken up the pen in the first place required a strong will, and the picture that emerges from the text indeed corroborates that assumption. Thus, although she was not writing about her own life per se, an image of her own character precipitates out.

The very act of writing, then, was another means for Shivarani Devi to consciously heighten her self-respect by engaging in activities unusual for women at that time in India. I do not feel, however, that she was consciously trying to paint a picture of a strong and confident "self" while writing about her husband; that simply emerged automatically from the honest nature of the narrative. Had she consciously been pursuing such a goal, she would have had to give a different title to the book. Still, all her self-confidence and strong sense of purpose both in her youth and during her conjugal life have been poured into it. The title and foreword may lead one to feel that some of her self-identity had to be sacrificed in the interest of her subject, but she is truthful enough to credit Premchand for helping her build up self-confidence by accepting her "rule" within the house.

It is worth re-emphasizing that Shivarani Devi does not accept that women are low. She believes that a woman can do anything a man can; that the two are equal. She has proven that for herself by crossing the domestic domain and proving herself a writer and a freedom fighter. But she was unhappy with the social status of women in her society, and so took up the fight, in consultation with her husband, to liberate women—a fight parallel to the one for the country’s independence.

Shivarani Devi’s “rule” at home may be compared in some sense to the Indian swaraj. Both she and her country fought to carve out a space or identity for themselves, and both had the necessary commitment to finally achieve their aims. She writes (Premchand 2012: 45), for example: “*maĩ gr̥hasthī ke bāre mẽ koĩ salāh āpse nahĩ leĩ*” (‘I do not take any advice from you concerning household chores’). She established herself as a homemaker, helped make family decisions, and in outside matters was a good advisor to Premchand and a good social worker and freedom fighter herself. She went about on her own becoming a writer and created a space for herself in that sphere as well. The air of confidence expressed in her narrative is confirmation that writing was merely one field of activity among many in which she was able to excel. While she basked in Premchand’s sun, she clearly was not satisfied to be known only as his wife. Posterity may remember her primarily for that, but it would be unjust to overlook her many other true attainments.

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