

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN NATIONALISM: A REVIEW OF PREMCHAND'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of women in the National Movement in the 1920s and 30s through the interpretation of Premchand's short stories. Premchand was born in 1880 and died in 1936. He has left behind a rich corpus of short stories, novels, and journalistic writing. By 1930 he came to be regarded as a Upnyaas Samraat. The celebration of nationalism by women in Premchand's stories is viewed sometimes from within the household and on other occasions from without, i.e., going out of the home.

Keyword: *Nationalism, Women, Colonialism, Non- Violence, Picketing, Satyagraha, Volunteer, Procession, Swaraj, Masculinity, Femininity*

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Introduction

In several stories, Premchand writes about the more open involvement of women in politics and protests. Usually, these were woven around the theme of nationalism. What are the themes that he focuses on? How does he represent this relationship? This article is an attempt to discuss these questions by interpreting few stories of Premchand.

In '*Samar Yatra*'~ 'Battle March' (Premchand1985, vol. 7, pp- 58-68) we come to know of the arrival of Gandhian nationalist volunteers to a village. The entire village was decorated. Nohri, a 70-years old widow, was extremely happy. If she had the means, she would have welcomed volunteers herself and would have organized a feast for the volunteers. Meanwhile, the police arrive at the scene. Nohria was emboldened and showed the courage to take up the matter with the police. The volunteers using the Gandhian language saw the innocent villagers as divine. They asked the villagers to remove fear from their minds. Swaraj was a state of mind, they said. Many villagers were willing to register themselves as volunteers in the march towards freedom. Nohria thought that these volunteers are saviors of the villagers who are followers of the Mahatma. She was hopeful that their pains and sufferings would be over with the help of such selfless volunteers. She felt as if she is sailing into heaven basking in a festivity. They were getting Swaraj by negating the very identity of the colonial state itself. The struggle for Swaraj helped them to overcome their inferiority, their submissiveness. Now there is no fear. Even Kodai, the headman of the village enlisted himself as a volunteer. True to the spirit of Gandhian nationalism the volunteers asked the villagers to shed greed, temptations, anger, and embrace non-violence. Nohria was so thrilled with the arrival of volunteers that she started dancing with joy. For the villagers, it was a holy Cause in which volunteers were considered to be equivalent to the saint itself. In other words, sacredness was attributed to the nationalist cause. So far as the Daroga was concerned, the volunteers invoked the Indianness in him, because he happened to be Indian. Since the Gandhian leadership was launching a peaceful war against the British, they spoke in favor of non-violence. It was the practical realism within the circumstances. They were not going for an armed struggle. They were mobilizing people with nationalist ideas only. Their whole job was to mobilize people by recruiting more and more volunteers. They were willing to continue the battle march by disseminating the ideas of nationalism. For the first time, the villagers were experiencing fearlessness. When the cause is powerful, individuality is not important. Hence there was nothing to fear, no personal pain, even if they were arrested. The power of the cause had gripped them. As if they could imagine freedom because their self was sovereign and they

were free from external control.

The whole ambiance of the village was basking in a new dawn and Nohri proved herself as an extremely powerful character. In the realm of thought, the villagers were free. The whole universe was enmeshed in a kind of mental game. In their mind, they were free. They negated temptation and fear. The state could control them physically but mentally indeed they were free. One can recall what someone told about Mahatma Gandhi in 1915, a journalist in South Africa said that people in power and position in India should be aware of this man who cared least for worldly pleasures and pain: you can try to control but his body, but you cannot control his mind. Swaraj was indeed a state mind. And Premchand explores how women too experienced this sense of freedom from fear.

In some of the stories, Premchand shows women as the moral core not just of the family but of the society struggling against colonialism. In '*Juloos*' ~ 'Procession' (Premchand 1985, vol. 7, pp- 58-68) Mithan Bai, a Daroga's wife moves out the precincts of the home, and criticizes her husband, to express her anger against the state. The story revolves around a procession to celebrate the resolution of Poorna Swaraj. Daroga Birbal Singh stopped the *Juloos* forcibly because he wanted to impress his bosses. Ibrahim, the leader of the procession said that they had taken a vow to go ahead, and no one could stop them. Birbal Singh refused to budge an inch. The volunteers sat and said that they would march when the police left. Birbal Singh then hit Ibrahim on his head with his baton. Thousands of people surrounded the place. The police were demoralized because they never expected to confront a mob of a thousand. The wounded Ibrahim sensed the situation. He was unwilling to have a violent tussle between the state and the people. So he decided to retreat. For him, there was no room for violent confrontation against the state. He was true to the Gandhian strategy of confronting a colonial state through non-violent means. He said we don't want to see broken cars and looted shops. He wanted to inculcate in people the idea of freedom by derecognizing the colonial state; not think of a violent overthrow of the colonial state. Even in the face of police violence, he felt no need to retaliate. He later succumbed to injury. The very fact of a fatal blow from the police baton symbolized the suffering that one had to go through for the sacred cause of nationalism. It was to be seen as a holy war.

Dog's wife rebuked him at home. She could see a mass upsurge. Matthan Bai after all was a part of society. *Daroga* was not a British man either: he was an Indian. There was a contradiction between his job which meant a position in the colonial state apparatus and his being Indian. His wife called him a slave of his boss. Within her, the idea of her being an Indian superseded the position that her husband

occupied. Hence, she chided him. Leaders who took the procession back were sure that they had created an awareness amongst the people, they were not defeated. But the role of Mithan Bai was evident. For Mithan Bai, the killing of Ibrahim was a mark of sheer brutality done for petty promotional benefits. It was a negation of one's belonging, one's identity: it was a total negation of one's history. This sense of denying one's identity, one's difference from the colonial masters, overwhelmed Mithan Bai and in the funeral procession of Ibrahim that followed the next day, she was found leading the procession.

The death of Ibrahim transformed Mithan Bai. She decided to carve out an independent life for herself, by breaking her relation with her husband. Many women along with Mithan Bai taunted Birbal Singh. Remorse converts Birbal Singh. When Mithan Bai goes to Ibrahim's house to comfort his widow, she found Birbal Singh. In the story, Mithan Bai emerges as a strong woman, refusing to be docile, refusing to be quiet, or remaining within the home to protect the home, as was expected from traditional women. In stories such as this Premchand does not conform to the usual nationalist resolution to the women's question. For many nationalists, women were not to enter the public space, march on the street, but be a good wives and good mothers: their commitment to marriage and their home was not to be questioned. In this story, Mithan Bai questions the primacy of his obligation to home, and underlines her primary commitment to the nation and the people.

In other stories too Premchand shows how women were critical agents of social transformation. '*Patni Se Pati*' (Premchand 1985, Vol. 7, pp- 17-27) is about a role reversal: the woman is shown as moral, valiant, imbued with nationalist fervor, and the man as cowardly and weak, and the former transforms the latter. Mr. Seth was a government servant and hated everything swadeshi and was wedded to everything that was *vilayet*. Mrs. Godavari Seth on the other hand, believed in nationalism. When the foreign cloth was set on bonfire, she felt irresistibly drawn towards the nationalist cause but Mr. Seth was unperturbed. One day she gave one paisa to a blind beggar who was singing a nationalist song. The beggar donated the same coin to the fund-raising program of the Congress. The Congress, on its part, auctioned that particular coin in order to demonstrate that the most deprived people were with the Congress. Mrs. Godavari bought that coin at the price of Rs 400. This is a metaphor for the selflessness of the nationalism. The blind beggar, who lives on other's alms, was willing to contribute to the nationalist cause. However, Mr. Seth was interrogated by colonial authorities. His wife buying back the coin in rupees 400 was an affront to the authorities. It was intolerable to them that the wife of Mr. Seth, who was getting rupees 1000 as salary, was donating money to the Congress. How

could Mrs Seth champion the nationalist cause from the salary paid by the colonial state? When Mr. Seth was taken to task by his officer, he felt humiliated and suffocated. When the officer beat him, he retaliated and resigned from his service. When Mrs. Seth was informed of the incident, she was delighted. Here, a role reversal takes place. The wife is shown as heroic and the husband is initially depicted as compliant and cowardly. He is transformed by the actions of his wife: her protests and his punishment, made him recognize the oppressive structure of colonial rule. In a familiar idea of masculinity, the husband is the breadwinner. Here he loses his job: and in a sense, he was emasculated. The Godavari asked him to accept his position while she would earn bread and take care of the family. If masculinity is associated with being the breadwinner in the patriarchal society, it was a role that the Godavari was willing to discharge.

In several stories, Premchand explores the idea of desire, and celebrates nationalism and renunciation as the new object of feminine desire and love. 'Vishwas' (Premchand 1979, vol. 3, pp- 9-23) is one such story. It revolves around three characters: Mrs. Ante, Mrs. Joshi, and Mr. Johri. Amte is a nationalist leader who exposes the cruelty of the state and the ways of the elite. Although he was an advocate of non-violence, he was angry when he saw the officialdom basking in luxury at Mrs. Joshi's house. He gave a militant address at a gathering, and the police wanted to arrest him. Miss Joshi thought that punishing Amte would further glorify him. So, he decided to trap him morally. She goes out to meet Mr. Amte in ordinary clothes. However, Miss Joshi was overwhelmed in meeting Mr. Amte. The simplicity and trust he had in her touched her heart. Miss Joshi becomes his follower because of his courage and fearlessness, his simplicity, and his commitment to the nation. Joshi finally leaves the company of Mr. Lahri. It is a moral victory of Mr. Amte, and what he embodied. The goodness of his heart finally triumphed, and even transcended the power equation. John wanted to retaliate and put Mr. Amte behind bars. But he realized that he could not win Miss Joshi's affection again. He was forced to acknowledge that Amte had not defeated him in the sphere of love alone but had been defeated in the realm of politics. It was neither power nor money, but commitment to the nation and the ideal of renunciation that had become the new object of feminine desire.

The same theme is explored in 'Aahuti' (Giri, ed.2004, pp- 132-139). It once again opposes the life of affluence, to the ideal of self-abnegation, dedication, love for country, and sacrifice. Lilavati has two suitors in this story. But she was irresistibly drawn towards the one who had decided to offer himself as a Gandhian volunteer in the *Yagya* of nationalism. She was so impressed by his dedication that she wanted to

break the shackle of affluence and wanted to be with Bishambhar, rather than her rich suitor, Anand. Gandhi's image played on her imagination. In a heated argument with Anand, she said that the message of nationalism, the ideals of Gandhi, opposed all inequalities. The man who embodied the Gandhian ideals of renunciation and self-abnegation became her object of love. She offered herself as *Aahuti* to the national movement.

In several other stories, Premchand explores what renunciation meant to women. He shows how for women nationalism and renunciation could imply a questioning of what was seen traditionally as sacred. Consider, for instance, the story '*Suhag Ki Sari*' (Premchand 1985, vol. 7, pp- 226-233). Gaura was traditional but her husband, a zamindar was committed to nationalism. When a bonfire of foreign cloth took place, she was hesitant to give her *Suhag ki sari*. For her, it was sacrosanct, a souvenir of her conjugal life. She was unwilling to sacrifice this symbol of her conjugal bond. But because of her husband, she finally gave up the most cherished symbol of her conjugality, and the sari was burnt in the holy fire of Nationalism. But she could not easily negotiate her tension. After all, her Suhag was protected by *Suhag ki Sari*. She feared that some calamity might befall her. But nothing of that sort happened. On the contrary, when she visited Swadeshi Bazar and found that artisans and craftsmen were happy at the increased sale of these goods, she too was delighted. People attributed their success to Gaura's *Suhag Ki Sari*, who in their eyes made a great sacrifice by renouncing her most cherished possession. Thus, the burning of her *Suhag ki Sari* made them independent and caused their liberation. That *Punya* that Gaura had done, furthered the cause of Swadeshi.

In some stories, Premchand begins to question, if hesitantly, normative ideas of masculinity and femineity. In '*Sharab ki Dukan*' (Premchand 1985, vol. 7, pp- 24-43) Mrs. Saxena wanted to sit on *dharna* to stop the sale of *Sharab* (liquor). But the chief of the Congress committee was of the opinion that this was a grey area where women should not venture. He feared the atmosphere around the liquor shops - with drunken men and rowdy behavior. However, Mrs. Saxena persisted because Mahatma Gandhi had made it possible for women to sit on *dharna* in front of liquor shops. She felt that it was Jairam's male ego that would not let women sit on *dharna*. She protested vehemently, "*You too are as selfish as other males, and don't want to give any opportunity to women.*" She lamented that women in the country are not freely allowed even to serve their nation. The next day, she violates the normal social code and goes to sit on *dharna* which was the prerogative of males till then. She has jostled around and thrashed; her sari was stained with blood marks. Jairam,

the male Congressman, comes and starts beating the drunkards. He tried to take control of the situation. Mrs. Saxena objects to the Arrival of Jairam. Fighting starts between the drunkards and Jairam. Finally, the liquor shop owner gives up his license and decides to open a swadeshi cloth shop instead. The moral pressure is here created through women's actions. The story was an argument for a new social code, which could sanction such actions for women, even when they violated conventional norms of femineity and masculinity. (Gupta, 1991). In 'Maa' (Premchand, n. d., volume: 1, pp- 39-53) Karuna is a widow who showers all her love and affection on her son. Her husband, a nationalist, was put behind bars by the colonial state, and later he dies. Karuna endorses his commitment to the nation. She believes in nationalism. She believes in the Gandhian value systems, and wants her son to follow in his father's footsteps. But her son violates that value system and wants to become a civil servant or judge instead. Finally, Karuna dies of heart failure. It is as if her whole value system had collapsed, life had lost meaning. Death embodied that collapse. Charu Gupta reads such stories as reflecting Premchand's obsession with the family. She says that mothering means suffering and Premchand appears to be obsessed with the motherly model of women. I would suggest that this is not entirely true. Motherhood is not fully affirmed through the story. What Premchand seems to suggest is that nationalism can bring under question all the conventional roles of women, create spaces of tension within the family, and fracture the taken-for-granted ideals of femineity. (Gupta 1991) Where nationalism triumphs, in the end, women seem to succeed in refiguring their social and moral world, where nationalism seems to fail in the end, like in 'Maa', the moral world of the woman seems to collapse. This seeming collapse, however, is itself an affirmation of the moral power of nationalism, not motherhood.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that our anti-colonial struggle had sufficient strength in it to counter anti-women ideas. And made women to participate and protest against the colonial state and celebrate nationalism.

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