

From the Home into the World: Re-Viewing Shudha Mazumdar's

Memoirs

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***Abstract:** The autobiographical narrative of Sudha Majumdar is a valuable historical and literary resource for gaining insights into the everyday life of a middle class Bengali woman from the early 20th century. This memoir is unique by virtue of the details that it unveils about one of the most common yet privy institutions of India, namely the purdah. Her memoir is a sincere account of her trials and triumphs as a woman in a patriarchal-colonial social milieu. This paper traces Sudha's life-trajectory from behind the purdah to her appearance in public life with the support of her father and husband.*

***Keywords:** Autobiography, Purdah, Women's Emancipation, Domestic setting.*

The 19th century constitutes a remarkable epoch in India's historical landscape, characterised as it was by social flux and fluid transformations in ideas, identities, ideals, and perceptions of groups and individuals. By the end of the century, a range of reforms had been advocated and implemented for the improvement of women's status and position in the Indian society. The protagonist of this essay, Shudha Mazumdar, was a product of this dynamic

milieu; her life story therefore has much to offer in terms of crucial insights into the times' idiosyncrasies from a woman's perspective.

The first autobiography by a Bengali woman was *Amar Jiban* (published in 1868) by Rashesundari Debi, who was born in 1809 and lived a pious and sheltered life.¹ Subsequently, a number of Indian women penned their life experiences, a bulk of which reflected the legacy of social reforms carried out in an era of colonial paternalism. There are certainly similarities in the themes and moods expressed in those writings; but each needs to be independently analysed as they are all unique narratives of women belonging to a similar milieu, yet with diverse experiences and life chances. This essay seeks to analyse a Bengali woman's autobiography within this context, and suggest the ways in which her life's narrative is premised upon the institution of *purdah* and its manifestations in various forms and on diverse occasions.

Shudha Mazumdar was born in 1899 in an upper caste, wealthy family of a respected landowner, Tara Pada Ghose. Although she spent her entire childhood in her Khidderpore home in Calcutta, her ancestors originally belonged to the Khulna district of East Bengal. Her autobiography, *A Pattern of Life: The Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, is a lucid disquisition of the contemporary times and their peculiar norms, mores, customs, and taboos as perceived by her, a woman experiencing the contrast of being within the *purdah* and subsequently emerging out of it.²

Shudha had recounted her life in over five hundred manuscript pages which she shared with the historian, Geraldine Forbes, who subsequently edited and published it with her permission. The memoir presents a Bengali woman's story from 1899 to 1930 and exemplifies a woman's nuanced understanding and representation of a society that she was a part of.³ The memoir is relevant for the frankness with which it provides some of the most intimate details of a girl's/woman's life and lived experiences. This autobiography is unique as its narrator belonged to a staunch Hindu family in late colonial India which simultaneously witnessed the influence of the contemporary colonial ideas, ideals, and ways of living and the contrasting firm traditional roots that were nurtured by the womenfolk in the family. Biographies of women belonging to Brahma families are more common as the number of educated women were much higher among the Brahmos in comparison to Hindus. Moreover, Brahma women received generous encouragement and support to pursue literary pursuits which is reflected in both their fictional and non-fictional writings.⁴ This narrative, on the other hand, is distinctive as it is reflective of the inbuilt contradictions of the socialization process of a girl child raised in a largely orthodox Hindu household.

The Home as the setting where life unfolded

A woman's life in early 20th century India was inextricably embedded within a domestic setting. Women/feminist writers since the late 19th century have

attempted to represent home as more than just a personal space with little political and historical relevance. The versatile potential of the private space of home has been emphasised in multiple contexts and is exemplified in the writings of women who situate their subject matter within the domestic realm. Shudha's memoir is no exception as it suggests how diverse elements and agents within the domestic realm opened up a world of possibilities for women to explore and exploit. Belonging to a traditional family in late 19th century Bengal, her identity was contingent upon the household she grew up. Its metaphorical boundaries including the physical spaces and her interactions with the inhabitants of the house shaped her experiences of childhood and her memories of its various facets. In her memoir, Shudha describes her home with great admiration and the things that she chooses to describe are noteworthy. She recalls her growing up in a big house where her father lived in the front wing of the house, while her mother and other women of the family lived in the other wing. The front wing had an English dining room, a Victorian drawing room, a well stocked library, and an office, besides verandas, corridors, and a marble staircase leading up to a roof terrace of great expanse. She refers to the other wing as comprising of 'Mother's rooms', emphasising the predominance of women in these quarters. She mentions that her father had a suite in this wing as did each of her brothers after marriage. Another aspect of the women's quarters that she mentioned with particular fondness was the accouchement chamber, calling it the 'cheerful little room... where all the family had been born and were

born' (p. 15). Sudha also describes three variants of kitchen setups operational in the household. The common kitchen of the house was in the charge of a brahmin cook whereas a Muslim cook was employed to prepare *belati khana* (English food) in a separate cottage especially for her father. Apart from these, Shudha's mother had her own private kitchen where she prepared tea for herself and other dishes for the family. Shudha points out, 'Ours was a very quiet household and we saw little of the world outside the great walls surrounding the garden....we were all in *purdah* (seclusion) in those days in spite of Father's advanced Western ideas.' (pp. 17 and 19)

The homes that Sudha calls her own after her marriage, including her father-in-law's home and the several homes that she set up with her husband in various stations of his posting, did not have the same impact upon her identity as the one in which she spend the first thirteen years of her life. Antoinette Burton's observation regarding the significance of home in women's writings suitably describes Shudha's placement of herself in her own autobiography. Burton writes:

The frequency with which women writers of different nations have made use of home to stage their dramas of remembrance is a sign of how influential the cult of domesticity and its material exigencies has been for inhabitants of structurally gendered locations like the patriarchal households.⁵

Shudha's account of her life also breathes along the veins of the houses that she inhabited and the people that she came across at various junctures in her life. The reader of Shudha's memoir is able to vividly visualize her life's experiences as she lucidly narrates how, where, and under what circumstances her life unravelled. The following sections will guide us through her experiences of life within the *purdah* as well as outside of it.

Growing up in the shadows of purdah

Shudha was the youngest among five siblings, preceded by three older brothers and an elder sister who was married before she was even born. She shared a special bond with her immediate predecessor, the brother who, besides being her only playmate, teased her relentlessly too. The men and women in Shudha's family had distinctly different lifestyles and trajectories. Whereas the men in the house, particularly Shudha's father, had appropriated Western habits of dressing and dining, the women's quarters presented a sharp contrast where any emulation of Western habits or articulation of Western ideas were severely forbidden. Women were accustomed to living in seclusion and participating in the various activities of running the household, and organising and observing several religious rituals.

There were several facets of living in *purdah* apart from shielding oneself from the male gaze. The restrictions imposed upon little girls for conforming to an appropriate lifestyle were countless as were the number of people

relentlessly disciplining the girl child. The prime objective of socialization was to inculcate such manners and qualities in little girls as befitting suitable brides, dutiful daughters-in-law, and companionate wives. Shudha too was not spared this regimen of upbringing. Family members trained her to become a righteous woman by the standards of the times. Some instances from her memoir provide insightful glimpses of this process. She was rebuked by her brother for eating 'unclean food' from the dishes served to her father: 'you are a girl, so it's a positive sin for you to eat fowl or their eggs'. (p.23) Again, when she was less than nine years of age, her elder brother concluded that his younger sister was 'growing up to be a wild good-for-nothing' and ordered that, 'from tomorrow you are to wash your own clothes'. (p.44) Thus, she was soon after initiated to work in the kitchen alongside her mother and other helpers. There, she spent a great deal of time in the company of a woman whom she called *Bamun Pishi* and who primarily looked after the kitchen affairs. She mentored Shudha to become an efficient house mistress and trained her in basic culinary skills. A statement that Shudha's mother and other elderly women in the household reiterated every time she disappointed them was, 'Remember, you will have to go to your father-in-law's home and if you do not know these things you will be held in disgrace.' (p.25)

However, Shudha was fortunate unlike many girls of her age, as her father decided that she should join a convent school for her basic education. She

shares with the reader some of her experiences of studying in a convent school with other English and Anglo-Indian girls under the instruction of kind nuns from France and Germany. She points out the contrast and conflict in the lessons and norms of conduct that she was taught at home and in school. She remembers how her mother was shocked and she cringed when Shudha was almost convinced by her friends that one should bathe only on weekends. In order to mitigate the influence of convent education, she was taught Bengali at home. Shudha further enlightens the reader regarding what constituted wholesome 'education' according to the standards of those times:

Since much would be required of the girl when she attained womanhood, a system of education began to prepare her for her future life from her earliest days. As nearly all things in India hinge on religion, this training was also centred in religious thoughts and practices...She who undertakes a lesson of this kind, is said to have undertaken a *brata*. The literal meaning of *brata* is vow...there are also *bratas* which are only for the young unmarried girl...The *Tulsi brata* teaches the child how to care for the bush of sweet basil...The cow *brata* makes her familiar with the four-footed friend whose milk not only sustained her in infancy but is still an important item of her daily food. There is another delightful *brata* called *punyi-pukur*, or the lake of merit, in which the child dug a diminutive lake and seating herself before it, prays to Mother Earth for the gift of tolerance and

for the fortitude to endure all things in life lightly, as does Mother
Earth herself... (pp. 29-30)

Shudha recalls being initiated into the performance of *bratas* beginning with worshipping Lord Shiva. Since the age of eight, she began worshipping Shiva every morning before leaving for her school. She was initiated into yet another interesting *brata* called the *Madhu-Sankranti brata* which was supposed to help her ‘gain a honeyed tongue’ as a cure for her sharp tongued remarks. (p.36) She was often reprimanded by her mother for her insolence which seemed to exhibit disrespect towards elders. While Shudha defended herself by adamantly arguing ‘But, it is true, Mother, so why should I not say it?’ (p.36), both her mother and sister warned her on several occasions that she would be subjected to a lot of pain and criticism in future at her father-in-law’s house if she did not mend her ways.

Shudha was sometimes invited by her father to accompany him on his afternoon outings, and this gave her another opportunity to step out of her home. However, even on these trips her conduct was strictly monitored, ‘to sit primly dressed in my best frock and straw hat trimmed with pink roses, in silence, was something of an ordeal...’ (p.25) There were some lapses in the orderly life that she was expected to lead in her own home, when she accompanied her mother to the ancestral village. She narrates the joys of freedom, scampering around unrestrained, that she enjoyed in the village. Here,

she learnt to climb trees and bathe in ponds; she even went out for fishing along with her cousins.

The transition from relatively care-free days as a child to mounting anxiety leading up to the day of marriage came as abruptly for Shudha as it did for most girls in those days. The ideas of marriage, marital home, and all that encompassed a married life were weaved into Shudha's everyday life since her childhood. Those days, the institution of marriage subsumed all subjects in day-to-day life; for instance, elaborate arrangements of dolls' marriage followed by a grand feast constituted one of the prime tasks at play for Shudha. She was 13 years old at the time of her own marriage and she described this momentous turning point in her life thus:

One fine day in November of 1910 I was preparing for my annual examination when I was told that I would not have to go to school any more for my marriage had been arranged...No school! Never to see my schoolmates and the good nuns any more! A gloom descended on my spirits and I moped about the house not at all happy about the idea of marriage. (p.77)

Shudha was an apt example of the girl child / woman category of nineteenth century India as described by Ruby Lal.⁶ She represented the collusion of the image of the girl child and an adult woman. This was most often the case with Indian girls in the 19th and early 20th centuries in India, when a female subject's transition from girlhood to womanhood became blurry and inconsequential with

the intervention of the institution of child marriage.⁷ Shudha too was expected to adopt womanly grace soon after her marriage when she was abruptly subjected to a new set of rules and restrictions. Her emotions can be best represented in her own words:

I well remember my first arrival at my father-in-law's house for I almost died within the gilded palanquin which carried me to my husband's ancestral home. We were very much in *purdah* in those days, and nice women were neither seen nor heard, especially new brides. (p.95)

The recollections I have of the first ten days at my father-in-law's house seem mostly to be connected with the difficulty of managing my veil, silver anklets and *sari*, and my desire to speak out. (pp. 99-100)

Sudha's sisters-in-law assumed the role of her friends and advisers on issues of propriety and acceptable conduct within the new household. All her trials and restraints were forgotten only when she was with her husband, a government official with a progressive worldview. She swiftly developed a bond of enduring trust and friendship with him over their late night chatting sessions, when they shared their experiences at home, school, college, and work. Shudha describes her disposition towards him in these words:

I was most interested in all he said, for he was a good raconteur, and when we laughed at the same things, I found it hard to remember that

he was eleven years older than I...we only met at night by the dim light of an oil lamp. Since it was highly improper for a new bride to be found in the same room with her husband in broad daylight, I always left while it was still dark and went to sleep beside my mother-in-law in the next room. (p.104)

She was extremely glad when her husband invited her to join him to every new place where he was posted. She accompanied him with great alacrity to various places like Faridpore, Netrakona, Suri, Tamruk, Chittagong, Manikgunge, and Bashirhat. As she interacted with women from diverse backgrounds and upbringing in these places, she was gradually able to shed her inhibitions and acquire the confidence to express herself more articulately in mixed gatherings. Before discussing further on Shudha's gradual emergence from *purdah*, it would be interesting to recount at this point how her initiation into motherhood was overshadowed by the thick veil of customs and superstitions.

The woes of *purdah*-bound customs came to haunt Shudha at the time of the birth of both her boys in two distinct ways. At the first instance when she went into labour, the local midwife was called upon for the delivery of the child. Shudha recalls that arrangements made to ensure the welfare of the mother and child was 'traditional rather than scientific'. (p. 130) She goes on to describe thus:

I remember being tormented by thirst as it was thought water might be injurious for my health. Nor was fresh air considered beneficial so the windows were closed to prevent my baby and myself from catching cold. A great fetish was made about 'touch'. I was not permitted to emerge from the room nor were visitors allowed to pick up the baby or touch me... (p.130)

I was confined in the accouchement chamber for a full month. It was a hard time with its many restrictions, but youth is resilient in body and spirit and I survived the ordeal. (p.132)

The birth of her second son was yet another novel experience for her as also for her family because a 'male' doctor was called upon to assist in the birthing process for the first time. As before, Shudha was initially entrusted under the care of a trained midwife; but the latter, realising that too prolonged a labour might complicate the delivery, advised that a doctor look into her case. After much deliberation and hesitation (especially on Shudha's mother's part), Dr. Biman Das Mukherjee was allowed to look into the matter and he saved the lives of both the mother and son. This near death experience left an indelible impression upon Shudha's psyche. She, however, tried to grapple with life's unsavoury offerings, something that gets reflected in the following lines:

My lengthy convalescence gave me a legitimate opportunity to muse over my experience and I came to the conclusion I had learnt all there

was to know of life. World weary with my knowledge, I attempted an
'Ode to Death' which ran thus:

I fear thee not, I dread not thee,
No terror for me oh Death hast thou,
The pageant of life's galaxy
Has lost its charm and glitter now... (p.181)

There is an abundant literature regarding Indian women's experiences of childbirth and the dubiousness of the practices of indigenous midwives.⁸ It reveals numerous instances of neglect combined with unhygienic methods of birthing, and also orthodox families' stubborn refusal of allowing male doctors to assist in times of difficult labour in the name of honour and propriety – all resulting in the death of countless young mothers and babies right into the 20th century. The *dais*, as the midwives were called, were severely criticised by proponents of Western medicine for their carelessness and inefficiency in handling the procedure of childbirth. They were accused of being negligent and unscientific, and for not paying sufficient attention to personal hygiene; indeed, they were known to adopt highly dangerous methods at times such as using physical force to induce premature labour.⁹ Shudha considered herself blessed as her father took the right call of permitting a male doctor to intervene at a most crucial juncture in her life. Although *purdah* had imposed several restraints on Shudha's life and agency, it failed to shield her spirits and it also

did not succeed in claiming her life, as it did in the case of numerous women across the subcontinent.

Progressive emergence from *Purdah*

The progressive outlook of both her father and her brother helped Shudha to overcome many negative, prejudicial, and even harmful effects of *purdah*. Although she was steeped in traditional ideas of living and conducting herself, she showed exemplary courage when presented with opportunities to lead a life outside of it. True, Sudha's tendencies were more inclined towards accommodation than subversion; being conscious of propriety, she seldom attempted to transgress the limits of liberation permitted by her father and later by her husband. Without flouting *purdah* customs of her own accord, she thus imbibed ways of presenting herself in a respectable fashion among the diverse groups of people she was required to interact with.

Shudha chronicles her first adventurous experience of going to the theatre. She was careful to mention that the year was 1912, and in her words: 'my education was enlarged by Didi who took me to the Bengalee theatre...' (p.110) It is interesting to note that she described her surprise and embarrassment upon witnessing women's unabashed live performances on the stage, while simultaneously complained of the net curtain used to veil the women in the audience to protect their respectability. In a way this visit to a theatrical

performance was Shudha's first decisive step beyond the regimented norms of appropriate *pardah* behaviour.

Shudha's memoir suggests that she found a new lease of life after her marriage. She described how she was elated with every new experience that she shared with her husband. She not only travelled to distant places in his company, but there were many little things that she did for the first time under his persuasion. She ate with him at the same table, they engaged in meaningful conversations, he insisted that she write letters to him while he was away on work, and much later she even learnt to swim with his guidance. All this enhanced Shudha's self-esteem and augmented her confidence to venture out into the public domain. Commonplace, no doubt, from today's point of view, these nevertheless were bold and radical gestures for a woman belonging to the times being discussed.

Shudha became interested in community-service during her stay in Suri, where her husband was posted for three years. She came in touch with Mrs. Saroj Nalini Dutt, the wife of the District Magistrate, and together they set out to organise a *mahila samiti* (women's society) with the objective to 'foster a better understanding between [the townswomen] and break the monotony of their secluded lives' (p.141). Many women were refused permission by their husbands to join the *samiti* on the ground that they would become negligent of their household duties and become 'immodest and unwomanly' (p.142). The

mahila samiti was finally inaugurated with members mostly comprising of wives of government officers who were the convenors too. The observance of *pardah* was respected and no men were allowed in the meetings. Soon after, the *samiti* contributed towards Red Cross's efforts to provide supplies and aid to Indian soldiers fighting in the First World War by stitching garments for them. Shudha was nominated the President of the first *mahila samiti* in Tamluk. Here and at subsequent postings of her husband, she worked for better medical facilities for the local people and tried to familiarise women with important social and political concerns of the times. For instance, she participated in discussions emphasising the significance of women's education necessary for the upliftment of women as well as for the progress of the nation. (p. 204) With regard to women's health concerns, she raised awareness regarding the rate of infant mortality. Also, in collaboration with the Public Health Department, she showed slides and films to women on how to improve health and hygiene and prevent the spread of malaria and cholera. (pp. 194 and 204) With their joint efforts, Tamluk appointed its first woman doctor for catering to the needs of female patients. Interestingly, although Shudha confidently worked to resolve various socially relevant issues, she continued to shy away behind the *pardah* from time to time to avoid indulgent interactions. She humbly admits: 'I was only twenty-two and in those days prone to be moved to quick laughter at the slightest provocation...[I] tried hard not to jeopardize his position by injudicious behaviour.' (p.162)

In her memoir, Shudha narrated her coming out of *purdah* as a hallmark moment in her life. She expressed her anxiety when she was persuaded by Mrs. Dutt and her husband to attend a garden party. That was the first time she stepped out of *purdah* and participated in a mixed gathering of men and women. She described the incident as ‘the awful ordeal of coming out of *purdah*.’(p.145). On another occasion she had exclaimed, ‘How am I to open my mouth to eat before Mr. Dutt?’, (p.154), upon being invited for dinner at the Dutt residence. Sudha, however, braved the occasion as Mrs. Dutt placed a large flower bowl between her and Mr. Dutt at the dinner table to dismiss her discomfort. Metaphorically speaking, the flower bowl served as an alternative to the *purdah*, in that it facilitated in the ‘provision of a symbolic shelter’ and in constituting ‘separate worlds’ ensuring the maintenance of social distance and modesty.¹⁰

Sudha states that she passionately worked as a member of *mahila samitis* across the various postings of her husband. Along with other women she organised public meetings, generated awareness regarding health and hygiene for mothers and children, and discussed other pertinent issues of a woman’s life and well being. She exhibits her liberal attitude in the memoir as she narrates how she supported the solemnization of a young widow’s remarriage (p.238).

Shudha’s memoir bears testimony to Indian middle class women’s interest in the political affairs of the country in the early 20th century. The impact of the

testing times for India under the British colonial rule has been deftly documented by Shudha. Her memoir delineates a picture of how complex political ideals and ideologies steadily permeated into the homes and minds of every Indian, men and women, adults and children. She recalls her 'first introduction to politics' at the age of 7, the time of partition of Bengal under Lord Curzon in 1905 (p.58). She recounts that the oath to boycott and wear only *swadeshi* were adopted at this time and the practice of *rakhi bandhan* ceremony was revived with patriotic zeal. Besides, in protest of partition, kitchen fires were not lit in Bengal homes, including hers, on 16th October 1905. As an adult, she accompanied her brother to the All-India Congress Committee meeting in Calcutta, where she was enamoured by the presence and oratory skills of the stalwarts of Indian politics. Her memoir is also representative of the common understanding of the various Gandhian movements as well as the perception and appropriation of Gandhi and his ideals in everyday life by diverse sections of the society.

Shudha's journey from home into the world

The memoir of Shudha presents an exquisite piece of literary endeavour by an Indian woman, and also constitutes an important source of history for gender historians studying the period. The experience of autonomy within the larger framework of subjectivity sets the tone of the narrative. Reconciliation rather than resistance permeates the trajectory of Shudha's life. The literary style, the

content, and the structure of the narrative capture the feminine essence in the most definitive sense. We get glimpses of a fractured feminist voice, one which tries to reach out to a liberal audience while simultaneously trying to conform to contemporary social decorum. The narrative repeatedly changes gears as it describes Shudha's maturation from a child to a child bride, to a mother, a responsible householder, and a social worker. In its entirety, the memoir encapsulates the voice of a child as well as that of an adult woman who presents her life story from a conventional standpoint while making a sincere effort to distinguish the traditional from the modern. Shudha could also be looked upon as a beneficiary of the liberating impulses and opportunities provided to women in the British colonial milieu, which served as an enabler for women to cross over restrictive thresholds to be articulate and express themselves.

Although this memoir ends in the year 1930, it is important to point out that Shudha continued to be a social activist and philanthropist till the time she breathed her last in 1994. She associated with national organizations working for the betterment of women's conditions and opportunities in India from the middle of the 1930s. Interestingly, she was drawn towards the lives and hardships faced by women inmates in prisons in India and abroad and developed and suggested measures to ameliorate their conditions along with their dependent children's. Shudha, who began her life in a sheltered cocoon, went on to travel abroad to Geneva for attending meetings on women's work

organized by the International Labour Organisation in 1951.¹¹ She left her imprint upon the social fabric by virtue of her passionate contribution for the betterment of the Indian women.

Shudha's account is distinctive for it contends with a variety of delicate subjects with utmost ease and confidence and with little embellishment or rhetorical tropes. It is indeed an ingenious offering by a woman rooted in the domestic domain and a belief system of early 20th century India. It is a sincere representation of the significance of the seemingly mundane life of a middle class woman in one of the most dramatic phases in the history of India. The articulation of Shudha's own journey from being a woman dwelling in the shielded women's quarters to one taking upon a public role for philanthropic causes is evidence of the triumph of the indomitable feminine spirit. She exhibited poise in her gradual emergence from the home into the world. This transition became the reflection of her self-confidence that inspired her to lend her voice to various pressing issues concerning women's day-to-day life. Her autobiography is a recounting of her triumphant self-discovery.

Conclusion

The genre of 'women's writings' per se has been widely explored in various works. However, it is important to appreciate the uniqueness of the representation of the content in each of these writings. While many other contemporary *bhadramahilas* may have been writing about their experiences

and lives around the same period, their course of life including their specific social milieu, education, their married, single or widowed status as well as their position/role in the family/society had a major influence upon what they chose to write about and the way in which they articulated their views. We need to contextualize and recognize the distinctiveness of each of these writings and value each for its own worth and refrain from the urge to club all together into inflexible categories. I have presented my analysis of Shudha's description of her emergence from the *purdah* from this standpoint, particularly trying to understand her standpoint from the milieu that she belonged to.

In the memoir, Shudha assumes the role of a contemporary observer, a participant, and a commentator as well. Her account provides us with intimate insights into the lives and coming-of-age experiences of girls/women in the early 20th century. Nostalgia constitutes a potent sentiment in the representation of her past experiences. The home as a physical space, circumscribed with diverse emotions and experiences, assumed a centrality in the way her life unfolds before the reader. The juxtaposition of the influence of the domestic realm vis-a-vis the sphere of public activity in the lives of contemporary Indian women is competently portrayed in the narrative. The impact of the tumultuous political scenario of India under the British colonial rule upon the ideas, ideals, and lived experiences of people across age, sex, and cross-sections of the Indian society is deftly woven into the fabric of Shudha's autobiographical narrative.

Shudha's emergence from the home into the world is a remarkable example of the determination and perseverance of women in *purdah* to reap the reward of emancipation in a patriarchal-colonial social milieu. In turn, the emancipation has been represented as a powerful tool in the hands of women like herself, who made every effort to give back to society by working for the betterment of the lot of women they identified as their fellow sisters.

Endnotes:

¹ Tanika Sarkar, A Book of her Own A Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman, *History Workshop*, no. 36. Colonial and Post-Colonial History, 1993, pp.35-65.

² Shudha Mazumdar, *A Pattern of Life: The Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, Geraldine H. Forbes (ed). New Delhi: Manohar. 1997. [Henceforth, page numbers have been quoted in this article to provide references from this text]. For the purposes of this essay I have relied upon Shudha's memoir as it is a comprehensive elucidation of her journey from the binds of *purdah* into a more liberated space where she realized her potential as a reformer, social activist, and philanthropist. Her other published works are more specific in nature and these do not illustrate her journey from the women's quarters into the public world as succinctly as her memoir does. These include: *Women in Prison at Home and Abroad*, 1957; an English

translation of the *Ramayana*, 1974; and her correspondences with various women's organizations compiled into volumes of *The Shudha Mazumdar Collection*.

³ Shudha begins her memoir with an entry from her father's diary that announced her arrival, 'Wife brought to bed of a daughter...' The entry was dated 22 March, the year 1899. (p. 15)

⁴ Some accomplished Brahmo women include Swarnakumari Devi, who wrote novels and was also the renowned editor of the women's magazine *Bharati*. This magazine was subsequently edited by her daughters as well. Kamini Roy was a famous poet and her sister Jamini Sen was a doctor.

⁵ Antoinette M. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in late Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 6.

⁶ Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁷ To cite an example of the overlapping stages of being a child, a bride, and a wife, Shudha recalls the instance when her brother's newly-wed wife became her playmate and she relates their innocence as her sister-in-law went up to her brother, lifted her veil from over her face and requested: 'Listen, Listen, Could you kindly open your room? We want to play Crocodile! Crocodile! there!' (p.68)

⁸ See Supriya Guha, "From Dais to Doctors: The Medicalisation of Childbirth in Colonial India," in *Understanding Women's Health Issues: A Reader*, ed. Lakshmi Lingam. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998. p.228; and Anshu Malhotra, "Of Dais and Midwives: 'Middle Class' Interventions in the Management of Reproductive Health in Colonial Punjab," in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 10:2. 2003. pp.229-259.

⁹ Anshu Malhotra, "Of Dais and Midwives," pp. 238-239.

¹⁰ Hanna Papanek, Purdah. "Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 15, No. 3. 1973, p. 292.

¹¹ Shudha Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, edited with an Introduction by Geraldine H. Forbes, New York: An East Gate Book, by ME Sharpe, Inc. 1989, p.221.