

## The Construction of Subjectivity in Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*

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### Abstract

The publication of Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* marks a significant landmark in the history of Indian feminism as a domesticated Bengali woman marks her shift from illiteracy to literacy through a long and arduous struggle with not only her self but also with the upholders of the dominant hegemonic forces of Brahminical patriarchy during the colonial times. This paper attempts to analyze how devotion and literacy combine to produce a subjectivity that despite being quite humdrum signals a paradigm shift in our conceptualization of how identity is formed. The focus of the paper will be on Rassundari Devi's articulation of those moments of her life where she confronted the conflict between her attempts at arriving at a sense of selfhood and the larger familial and societal forces which constantly worked to keep her subjectivity confined within the domestic space of household chores. Her writing of her own autobiography marks the moment of her departure from the traditionally assigned role as the housewife into the larger terrain of the public space which is embedded within the very act of writing and speaking for one's own self.

**Keywords:** autobiography, self, subjectivity, woman, narrative

Rassundari Devi is the first woman to have written an autobiography in the Bengali language at quite an advanced age of her life. There seems to be nothing very exemplary or interesting in term of events that she had experienced during her lifetime yet what engages the attention of the modern reader is the sheer ordinariness of the life of a woman like her and yet the extraordinariness of the very feat that she had been able to achieve considering the limitations of the colonial era in which she was born. Her book is not just the articulation of a single Hindu woman but speaks of women in general of her times although the author herself shows no realization of how her writing serves as a social document. Rassundari Devi writes her life's narrative without any knowledge of the larger political intervention that her act of writing makes in the realm of women's historiography. It is a simple document yet it achieves a lot.

The importance of women's autobiographies has been considered only lately by academics and scholars. Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* if translated into English means "My Life" which is a very simple, unassuming and straightforward title for an autobiography that makes no pretensions to anything academic. She writes the story of her life long before any theorization of autobiographies, let alone of women's autobiographies had emerged. In his seminal essay titled "Conditions and limits of autobiography", Georges Gusdorf elucidates

that the essential prerequisite for writing an autobiography is the existence of a proper sense of self:

It is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist. (Gusdorf 30)

Such a view of autobiography has however been contested by feminists who have pointed out the inadequacy of such individualistic theories for women and other marginalized groups. In her essay titled “Women’s autobiographical selves: Theory and Practice”, Susan Stanford Friedman has critiqued the Gusdorfian model; she contends:

The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of group identity for women and minorities. Secondly the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective, in other words, individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (Friedman 72)

Taking cue from Friedman’s analysis one can therefore understand that there is a very basic difference between the ground on which the notion of the self gets constructed in the case of men and women. For women, it is not the concept of a fiercely individualistic self that informs their autobiographical enterprise but the notion of a relational identity that fosters the sense of selfhood and subjectivity. This analysis is particularly relevant in the context of *Amar Jiban* where the author’s sense of self can be seen as getting constructed through an identification and association with divinity. The self which gets articulated in and through the process of writing is itself conceived as an act of god’s grace where the self gets sublimated into a higher metaphysical plane and it becomes rather difficult to etch out the crude boundaries of an individualistic self.

What occupies the central place in Rassundari Devi’s autobiography is how she came to learn to read and to write. At a very early age, it was her mother who had introduced her to “Dayamadhav” to overcome her childish fear of strange people. (Devi 25). This idea of the God as a personalised entity gets indelibly imprinted in her mind:

Actually I had no idea of what was meant by the word God. But I had heard people talk of God. “He knows what goes on in every mind”, said my mother, “because he is divine”. Mother’s words gave me a lot of moral courage. Since that day I could begin to understand many things... whenever I was scared I would think of him. These words of my mother made a permanent impression on my mind—Mother had said that God is with us. (Devi 30)

Right from the very beginning Rassundari speaks of her days at her mother’s home where she had her Pishi (her father’s sister), her younger brother, her uncle, her playmates, her *khura*, her *khuri ma*—with all of whom she was very close. She also explains how she came to learn all the household chores and was married at the age of twelve. Her life at her maternal place goes a long way in shaping her sense of self/subjectivity vis-à-vis the people around her and also around the divine figure of the deity. The connected nature of the self takes shape

through interaction with and participation in the various activities that take place within the household such as playing with her playmates, taking care of her *khuri-ma* and her child, cooking and sitting along with the boys in the Bengali school that was run in her house. She remembers those days with a sense of joy:

This is how the first twelve years of my life were spent. During this period I was happy and carefree, protected by my mother and other members of my family. (Devi 32)

In all these recollections do we rarely get the sense of a self that is constructed along individualistic lines. A very strong sense of one's identity being nourished and protected gets conveyed through these lines. Rassundari Devi's self was inextricable interwoven with the lives of people around her, her family and relatives and that is the reason why her marriage marks a break in her life as she gets separated from her maternal family. It is at this critical juncture of her life that she takes refuge in her "Dayamadhav" to overcome her grief and anxiety arising out of estrangement from her mother and other relatives. The only way in which she can reconcile to her changed circumstances is by ascribing it to the will of God. She feels a complete sense of loss on her journey to her in-laws place as she can see none of the familiar faces around her. She says:

When I woke up the next morning I found myself on a boat with none of my relations around me. All the people who came and talked were strangers. I thought of my mother and other members of the family, the affectionate neighbours, my playmates. Where were they now and where was I? (Devi 36)

As is quite clear from the above lines, Rassundari undergoes a sense of alienation as she finds herself amidst strangers. Her sense of who she is gets severely undermined in the absence of familiar faces. Her identity is not just limited to her self but extends to her family, friends, neighbours and relatives. Such a notion of identity departs from the definition of autobiography theories which treat identity and subjectivity as givens—as the solid ground upon which the autobiographical narrative embeds and inscribes itself. Gusdorf states that "autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image" (Gusdorf 33). Sheri Benstock in her essay titled "The Female Self Engendered: Autobiographical writing and theories of selfhood" has contested this view of Gusdorf and argues that:

But this definition of autobiography overlooks what might be the most interesting aspect of the autobiographical: the measure to which "self" and "self-image" might not coincide, can never coincide in language—not because certain forms of self-writing are not self-conscious enough but because they have no investment in creating a cohesive self over time—they do not name self. (Benstock 7)

Rassundari Devi's text is one such example of not naming the self as being distinct from what lies outside the self. The self in *Amar Jiban* weaves seamlessly into the people and into the divine. There is however in her writing a pendular movement between the realization of a self that is entrapped and a self that is entwined with God. The former conveys a sense of self that is individualistic and the latter conveys a sense of self that is relational. Her narrative negates and defies the very premise on which Gusdorf's theory of autobiographical narrative rests itself i.e. the rigidity of the distinction between the self and the other and by extension the public and the private, the center and the margin etc. Rassundari says:

Even now I remember those days.

The caged bird, the fish caught in the net.

Since it was the will of God, however, it was no use feeling sorry for myself. (Devi 36)

The sense of being entrapped and a resignation to the will of God can be seen as simultaneously operative in her narrative as though the very desire to assert the self is repudiated by an immediate surrender of the self to the larger design of God. She speaks with the consciousness of an oppressed woman; the metaphor of the caged bird keeps coming up in her narrative multiple times and yet she is unable to transcend her predicament through any act of resistance. She even laments being born a woman, particularly after recounting the incident of her mother's death when she was not allowed to visit her ailing mother who was on deathbed. She says:

Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life...If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother's bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird. (Devi 50)

It was during her stay at her in-laws house during the initial days that she talks about having established a personal communication with God. She says, "But I never talked to anyone except God and that was a silent communication." (Devi 39)

Like a typical *bhakt*, she sees the hand of God in everything and even attributes her ability to take care of all the household chores to the kindness of the divinity. At various points in the narrative, however, one can feel the echoes of discontentment ringing through, such as when she speaks about the denial of education to women in those days. Her sense of helplessness in the face of the discriminatory social prescriptions for women carries a tone of lament:

Women were not supposed to get an education in those days, they had to stand by demurely near the master of the house after all their housework was over, as though they had no other work except household tasks. That was how people used to think in those days. (Devi 42)

By overhearing the conversations of the men in her household, she had come to know that reading was prohibited to women lest women started behaving like men. Somehow her interest to read the letters is triggered by her desire to read the religious texts. Just as on the previous occasions, she takes recourse to her deity to help her learn to read. She knows that the times have now changed because many women are now being educated and she lauds it as a good practice. The flowering of the self which takes place through the act of literacy is here expressed not in terms of an individualistic desire but in terms of a larger religious aspiration to read the texts of Vaishnavism and thereby to create a medium to reach god at the level of the textual. Her insurmountable desire to read and write is obstructed by virtue of being born a woman. Her woman's self, considering that being a woman is a significant and undeniable part of her identity, finds itself constrained by the social prescriptions of her times and what thus unfolds is the idea of a self that struggles to be born in its fight against the patriarchal forces that impose a social self which is at odds with one's true self. She says:

After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read. How could I? ...People used to deprive women of learning...But somehow I could not accept this. I was very keen to learn the alphabet. (Devi 51)

There is a certain desperation in these words. It is the desperation of a suppressed self that is trying to wriggle out of the social restrictions imposed on women in those times. One can feel the way in which Rassundari Devi, as a representative woman of her times— a Hindu, upper caste, illiterate housewife—is trying to carve out a space within the very limitations of domesticity that she finds impossible to transcend evident as it is from the metaphor of the caged bird and the fish caught in the net. It is true that she never articulates her sense of discontent in any political terms and even tries to reconcile herself to her fate by giving it a metaphysical dimension of a design willed by God, one can nonetheless fathom the anger that seethes beneath the apparent serenity of her articulation. Her sense of selfhood gets problematized by getting caught in this tug of war between the need to assert herself and the desire to sublimate her sense of self into the divine. She finds the solution to this by mediating her desire of learning through the religious route. She wants to learn, not to achieve any individualistic ambitions but to read the books on religion, and her desire seems to get a divine validation through the very suggestive dream that sees one day wherein she had seen that she was reading the *Chaitanya Bhagvata*—a seminal text of Bengal Vaishnavism based on the life of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The subjectivity of Rassundari Devi thus finds a breeding ground within a religious context, which however exceeds that context to find its way into the larger public domain of writing and getting her work published. The stealth which accompanies her endeavour to learn the letters of the Bengali alphabet within the confines of her kitchen marks the extraordinary journey of a woman whose sense of self, despite being tied inextricably with religion, cannot but remain solely confined within the precincts of her faith but goes beyond to unleash a sense of selfhood that is conscious of its own victimization at the hands of patriarchy, in however euphemistic terms it might be stated. Her sense of having transgressed the prescribed code for women is evident from these lines:

When the book was brought into the room I detached one sheet and hid it. But I was afraid lest it be found. That would be a disgrace. I might even be rebuked... Those days were not like present ones. We were completely under the control of men. (Devi 52)

Her regret at being born a woman is often reiterated in her narrative. She realizes that her attempt to learn becomes all the more difficult on account of her gender. This realization amounts to the creation of a sense of subjectivity which is conscious of its own state of oppression and yet is unable to surmount it through any act of resistance. She says:

Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence...The little that I have learned is only because God did me the favour. (Devi 54)

Later she goes on to recount how her ability to read was slowly known to the other people, first only to a few and later to all the people in her household and she thanks God for being her teacher without whose aid she would never have been able to achieve such a feat.

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* therefore traces the journey of her subjectivity through various ups and downs of her life, what however remains constant is the notion of a self that is relational and gets constructed through association and connectedness rather than through the assertion of individualism. The self is not taken for granted but is shown as in the process of making through the various relationships that are fostered with humans and with God.

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