

Quest for Truth and Identity in Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)***Dr. Virendra Kumar Yadav**

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Abstract

Literature has always been a male-dominated discipline; men have always held a dominant position in society and the literary world. The self-expression and identity of women are always denigrated by these male-centric writers, who never address any concerns about women and their beings. They only write about topics that affect their gender, such as exploitation, class conflict, industrialization, and war. The male-dominated society has always attributed certain rigid gender roles to women in the form of a wife, a mother, and a nurturer. Considering other desires outside these traditional roles is said to be a transgression. Authority and power are always in the possession of man. Men are capable of mystifying women that their gender status of inferiority is preordained throughout history. Male Writers wrote about a woman based on their assumptions and notions rather than how she expressed herself or her social obligations. A woman is merely an object of desire to a man; she is viewed as a secondary entity whose emotions and feelings are never taken into account and are only evaluated based on her physical contributions. Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, an autobiography, is seen as an insurgent novel that aids women to reveal the truth about relationships they have with their own bodies and construct their own identity.

Key Words: male-centric, woman, gender, transgression.

Mapping Women's Status and Barriers

Women writers have always been invisible in the public sphere and literature until the nineteenth century, when female writers like George Eliot, the Bronte Sisters, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen came into being and joined the canon alongside men. Since some of these women had to conceal their true identities under a strong male identity, they have been insignificant in producing their works. As a result, they have adopted pseudonyms to publish their works, attract readers, and launch successful writing careers. These women have always been under the shadow of men, and they have been influenced by men and their writings, so much so that even in their own writings, they appear to adopt the same characteristics as male writers. Perhaps they were forced to follow the men's pattern because they were afraid that if they showed any differences in their writings, such as focusing more on a woman and herself, or a woman and her physical needs and wants, their works might be viewed with suspicion and possibly abandoned. This demonstrates that even women authors have not been given the freedom to write about who they really are, what their bodies require and desire, and what they are capable of. In her historical essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Helene Cixous suggested that a woman has

always been driven away from the field of writing and even if they tried to, their writings are considered to be of no use or rather a piece of nonsense just like how the whole being of a woman is disregarded in the male-dominated society “from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (Cixous 875). Men have always focused on themselves; they believe they are the superior gender, which is undeniable based on their physical attributes. But what is quite amusing is the fact that they take their physical superiority not just in a physical sphere but in almost every sphere, like psychologically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, etc.

Men had been controlling and dominating women not only physically but also intellectually. Men consider education is only reserved for them and they get admission in universities, and their writings are a noble art meant only for the “noble and superior gender” and the whenever women tried to break the barriers and construct their identity so called status, they regarded women as “inferior gender” or “unimportant” or if they failed to criticize the work, they never failed to criticize the creator of the work, who is a woman and sometimes they even brand the woman as “insane” only out of fear, and public visibility of women writers, they considered education is reserved only for the great and superior gender. “Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great-that is for ‘great men’” (Cixous 876).

Challenging gender-based inequality, oppression, and discrimination, the movement to reject the social and cultural tradition formed by the Patriarchy is emerging under the umbrella term “Feminism”. It is a key to fight for women’s rights. As Toril Moi explains, “Feminism is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (Nayar 84).

Mary Wollstonecraft. In her seminal text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1891), she wrote a masterful response against gender-based inequality in society. Wollstonecraft took an unconventional platform to speak about the importance of education for Women. She argues that young women should receive equal education, the same way men have access to education, and asserts that females, like their male counterparts, should be defined by their vocations and not their marital partners. She also assumes that women should not be treated as a kind of property. In her opinion, Men and Women are human beings who deserve a balanced reception.

Feminists argue that there is a difference between a female and a feminine. The societal roles for a woman to bear a child, and her natural duty to nurture the child. Moreover, the society added that ‘she’ is fragile in comparison to a man, and because ‘she’ is only a possession of a man, he puts her in a domestic sphere to tend to his needs, whereas ‘he’ can enjoy the public life. This is the ideology made by the patriarchal society for women to be accepted. As Simone de Beauvoir states, the process of socialization is based on gender. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 330). Other than physical strength, women's uniqueness is not taken into consideration. She is subjected to an inferior and debilitating condition. Beauvoir stresses that a man can set that ideology in a woman's mind and claim he is a dominant societal figure. Consequently, a female is identified as a dependable creature of man. In a male-created structure, women lived only under the shadows of men, they were expected to fulfill traditional domestic roles, and acquiring knowledge and self-expression were considered taboo. The identity and voice of a woman in society are barely recognizable and heard. Invariably, their positions

were placed at the bottom of society. They were expected to submit their life under the jurisdiction of male authority.

Textual Analysis

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (MY Life)* (1876) is the first Autobiographical novel written by an Indian woman in the Bengali language. Rassundari Devi's autobiographical novel documents the important historical event that Rassundari Devi represents the mutual experiences of women in Bengal who have traditionally been silent about their suffering and their exploitation, the autobiography is also seen as an insurgent novel that aids women in reconstructing self-expression about relationships they have with their own bodies and construct their own identity. Rassundari Devi educates herself on how to read and learn to write so that, through writing, she can transgress the societal norms of her society.

This paper aims to explore how masculine subjectivities are created within the patriarchal system, playing a role as barriers and obstacles in the construction of women's identity, and also examines the portrayal of a woman who battled to become literate in the 19th century. In the novel, a woman struggles to transgress the barriers to construct her identity and position in society as a human being. A patriarchal society is one in which "Man" alone possesses the majority of the authority, hegemonic masculinity that subjugates women and children, as well as explains how a man in a household was not only the head of the home but also controlled the lives of his wife and daughter. Throughout the years, men have always made women feel inferior, and with the coming of the foundational theory carried out by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, it has given them the strength to castrate women and consider them as "lacking". This is based on the two theorists' point of view that a woman is considered not as great as men because she lacks a "phallus" which in modern feminist reading is quite questionable since the lack of a phallus is the reason why a woman is a woman, otherwise, she would be just like men, and that there would be nothing as interesting as female if a woman is ever created with a "phallus". The claims made can't be denied that it was inspired by how society views a woman, as lacking. But at the same time, men cannot be entirely blamed because their attitude towards women has been handed down to them from the previous generations; that is, a male child must have seen how a mother has been treated in the household, and later in his own household he feels that his wife is expected to be treated the way his mother was treated. Society is one main force that makes a woman feel that she is living in a cage and the air of freedom is a faraway scenario for her. Even when a woman is surrounded by a loving and supportive family, societal expectations are what keep a woman from being her true self and from running after her own happiness out of the cage; society automatically and inaudibly tells a woman to be in her own domain- the domestic zone and she has to accept her life the way it is because this is just not her fate but her entire destiny as a woman.

Rassundari Devi's life, no matter how loving her surroundings are, at the end of the day, she has to succumb to societal norms; she has to be in her own domain, working endlessly and selflessly, looking after the kids and the house as a whole, as this was the societal custom. She is a Bengali woman who lives in a society that is governed and ruled by the power of 'Man'. She is perceived to be a weak figure in her society. Her roles are to be a wife, a caretaker, a mother, and

a mistress to take care of a large house. As a young girl, she lived with her mother, and she recounts that her childhood days were filled with happiness, cheerfulness, and positive privileges. However, when Devi reached the age of twelve, she was obliged to marry an unknown person. At that age, she was still ignorant of the idea of marriage and the overall social structure. She went through miserable suffering when they forcibly took her away from her mother to a family she did not even recognise. Her life began to change gradually as she grew older, and in her formative years, society chained her with barriers as heavy shackles that weighed her down. She was imprisoned by the social customs throughout her years residing in a male-centric society. She was being subjected to a cage bar, a life without any freedom.

When Rassundari Devi learned to do household chores, all the members of her family supported her and showed their affection towards her, since she is a girl, she is bound to perform and know all the household work for the rest of her life, which was the duty that was made over by the traditional society. Her space was confined to a domestic sphere only, whereas man is the center of attention in a Patriarchal society. Throughout history, women have been mistreated and neglected, their identity has been invisible in contemporary society. Devi has been constrained and pressured into entering a marriage system framed by society. During that period, Devi did not take root in awareness of the concept and the purpose of marriage. "She has to be given to someone, that is why she is born a woman" (Chatterjee 33). Rassundari Devi, living in a patriarchal society, had her identity as a woman merely a material possession of a man. Her reason for existence is solely to be a love object to a man. Her life was completely controlled by men through the act of the marriage ceremony, more so, identifying her as a wife. Women's subservient status in the patriarchal social structure serves to uphold and reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

Man is a social term, just as woman is a man-made category with patriarchal definitions of masculinity and femininity. Through construction/deconstruction by transgression, a new image of an Indian emerged that uses Western ideas to depict their identity. In Indian patriarchal culture, caste, religion, politics, sex, and gender have been crucial in upholding men's domination and women's subordination. Connell proposes the concept of "Hegemonic Masculinity" (Connell 32) as a hierarchical conception of maleness and masculinity shaped by men in positions of authority, whether politicians, barons in charge of the government, or oppressive heads of various ethnicities. Connell states, "Hegemonic masculinity emerges in the practices and values of powerful men, although powerful men may not exhibit hegemonic masculinity in their everyday behaviour" (Connell 146).

One of the main tools is the marriage system. Through a marriage system of heterosexuality, the patriarchal institution can arrange and maintain a position in society. Women in the domain of marriage have been confined to the domestic sphere, she has to perform household chores, cook, and attend to their children and their families. Her aspirations, ambitions, and desires were disregarded. These roles created gender inequality and a challenge and obstacle to Women. This is a form of imprisonment shaped by society throughout the ages

and reinforces it to suppress women from enjoying their rights to achieve education, employment, and other directions that prevent them from attaining self-empowerment.

Rassundari Devi can never break free from social norms; she has to marry. Just because she was born a woman, she got married very early. Her worth was downgraded to an object to be exchanged between families. Her identity was created by society. She made it so clear about her suppression when she said, "If I am asked to describe my state of mind, I would say that it was very much like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams" (Chatterjee 35). Rassundari Devi was forced to conceal her spirit and desire. Her heart was filled with anguish, torment, and frustration. A woman should suppress her dreams and passion and replace them with household responsibilities. Once Rassundari Devi got married, the tendency to be free was unattainable; she was imprisoned by society, which instructed her to never cross beyond the boundary.

She reveals that "I was still pining for my home secretly, but my stay at my In-laws' house had tamed me like a bird"(Chatterjee 39). Her days in her in-laws' gave her a tedious life, besides domestic duties, education for women is against the norms of society "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" (Chatterjee 42). This leads to the effect of psychological imprisonment, which is similar to a caged bird struggling to spread their wings for freedom. Rassundari Devi was battling to let out her natural tendency for liberty and self-expression. Growing up in her in-laws' house, she developed a strong desire to be able to read books and learn how to write. However, in a patriarchal society, reading and writing are associated with men. Receiving an education for women is an inconceivable notion. Society discouraged women from pursuing education. During those days, societal norms believed that educated women posed a greater threat to the future of the betterment of society. "In those days, people considered the education of women to be wrong. Even now, we come across some who are enemies of education. The very word excites their displeasure" (Chatterjee 54).

Children are supposed to bring joy and happiness to parents, whereas, in the case of a patriarchal society, it gives rise to a tremendous obligation to the mother. She has to undergo multiple experiences, obstacles, and responsibilities for having a child. She endured labour pain when delivering a baby, she had to sacrifice for her own physical well-being to tend to their children's needs. A man does not need to get involved in these domestic duties. Rassundari Devi has so many children of her own. She has borne twelve children in only a few years with an age gap between one child and another. That massive burden is her responsibility, she has to carry an enormous weight solely on her shoulders. "As was the custom, I had to do all the work and look after the children as well. I had to work right through the day and the night, without a moment's rest. Suffice it to say that I had no time to think about my own health. So much so that I often did not eat either of the two meals" (Chatterjee 46).

Rassundari Devi chooses to educate herself despite the gender roles assigned by society. She stood against the oppressive power structures that attempted to mute her voice. She remarked that "In fact, older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman. So that ruled out my chances of getting any education. But

somehow, I could not accept this" (Chatterjee 51). Rassundari Devi used to be a prisoner captive behind bars by society, and determined to establish her status as a writer and break free from the social convention and societal expectations, she opted to go beyond social barriers and decided to educate herself on how to read and write, a life-changing process. She dedicated herself to taking back her authority over her body and experiences. She was also hoping to implement writing as a means of liberation for other women to take control of their lives and express their identities. She perpetrated the act of transgression by writing bravely to break down barriers and boundaries that had long kept women neutral and unnoticeable. Rassundari Devi had already possessed some basic understanding of the alphabet because as a child her family chose to put her near the missionary school as there was no one to look after her at home, and from that missionary school where only boys were allowed to attend, she received a few prior knowledge of letters and characters to form words for reading. Later, when she gets married, the ambition to advance her education becomes more serious. However, it became a tricky task to accomplish her desire to gain education, with a basic fundamental understanding of the alphabet and no mentor to teach her. Moreover, with the overwhelming task that was assigned to her. Through such difficulties, she found one of the religious books that existed in her home. Even at this point of receiving the book, she had yet to read it was a difficult task for her since there was no private space and time for her to learn to read it at ease:

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. It was not easy to face criticism or rebuke. I was very sensitive about those things. Those days were not like present ones. We were completely under the control of men. And I was particularly nervous. I was at a loss with that sheet..... The khori* in the kitchen was the only hiding place I could think of. Housework kept me busy the whole day. There was no time even to look at it. In the evening the cooking continued until it was very late. By the time I was free, the children had awakened. Some demanded to be taken to the toilet, some were hungry, some wanted to be picked up, some started crying, so I had to attend to their demand (Chatterjee 53).

Rassundari Devi, in a traditionally male-dominated culture, has to endure and encounter social stereotypes and expectations that keep her at home most of the time, which reduces their chances of exploring other activities for entertaining and expressing their own feelings. The kitchen has become the only place where women can go to escape from the constraints of this restrictive public framework. Rassundari Devi developed this complicated room as her room of learning. Being the center of all household activity, the kitchen functions as both a practical and a metaphorical safe place for women. Rassundari Devi utilizes the Kitchen as a room for performing societal activity as well as a room to pursue her dreams. This kitchen is a room that has a load of domestic chores that provide her with a small amount of freedom in the face of the many gendered restraint that they encounter every day.

Virginia Woolf in her seminal text *A Room of One's Own* states that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). In the view of Virginia Woolf,

society should alleviate such type of suffering from the life of a woman. To create a more equal society between both genders, society should provide a private room and a sufficient saving for women to take part with men in a literary canon. Upon learning how to read, Rassundari Devi was left with a problem writing, but her need to express herself through writing was getting more intense. She wanted to be able to tell the truth about herself to the world and put her thoughts on paper. She began an amazing journey of resilience since she was determined to overcome her fear and obstacles. Her husband's health eventually gave her a good opportunity for her career. Her husband's sickness required treatment and an extended stay in the city, which is far away from home. This was not what she had expected, instead, it was a perfect chance for her to break free from the household work and other responsibilities. So, after six months of looking for her husband to recover, she had the opportunity to focus on improving her writing, and finally, writing helped her to get an identity in society. "But in those days, women did not enjoy any freedom at all, they could not do anything on their own, they were totally under others. It was like the life of a bird in a cage. Nevertheless, I would like to put down my feelings even in those circumstances" (Chatterjee 63). The day Rassundari Devi learns to write, she utilizes it as a tool to navigate all the stories she has experienced. It was through writing that she was able to express her uniqueness, her body, and her thoughts, and make her voice heard in a society where writings help her to express the truth. Men have always been very dominant, even in writing. In most of the great and renowned works written by male authors, even if they chose their central character to be a woman yet it is seen that they mostly portray a woman the way men and society generally view women that is, as passive gender, subordinated, whose feelings and experiences are not theirs and whose entire existence is seen as merely an object of desire and possession of men. As mentioned above, writing is not generally meant for women, but in *Amir Jiban*, it is seen that Rassundari Devi transgresses all the social norms and narrates her own story. Despite all the boundaries, she chooses writings, which serve as a means of expression and reconstructing the relationship with her own body. She uses writing as a means of expressing her internalized feelings. Her writing voices her challenges, sacrifices, and aspirations. In a seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous, she talks about women's writing and "What it will do" (Cixous 875). She encouraged women to express their own internalized experiences and feelings to reclaim their voices and bodies through writing.

Rassundari Devi finally takes upon herself the trouble of writing, which signifies that she crossed all the boundaries that had limited her from doing so all these years. It is through her autobiography that she reveals:

I was married at the age of twelve. Since then, I have completely lost my freedom and been also deprived of the great fund of affection my family had for me. At one stroke my childish nature change, I became a new bride. All my ornaments were new, so were my dresses. I learnt how to act and behave like a new bride. So, from the age of twelve, for the next six years I was a new bride and nothing else. Meanwhile, God bestowed by body with the necessary equipment. Wonder of wonders! I had my first son when I was eighteen, then I had others, twelve altogether (Chatterjee 73).

Conclusion

It is to be noted that Rassundari Devi's writing is not merely just a writing for the sake of writing, it is not just a woman writing about the injustices done by society it can be looked at from the lens of feminine writing, the kind which Helene Cixous talked about in her seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". By mentioning that she had given birth to a dozen children, it is proof that she is talking about her own body, herself, and this is not at all different from what Helene Cixous had written in her essay, in which she also said that women should not be afraid of the past. Rassundari Devi chooses to tell her story from the past, she collects her past experiences and writes her own story because she feels that her past needs to be addressed and that her stifled past can no longer stifle her when it is turned into writing and therefore she breaks away from the societal expectations and she is no longer scared of how her past had been, she chooses not to be defined by her past but what she turns her past into and that is turning it into writing for the future "The future must no longer be determined by the past..... I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural" (Cixous 875). Rassundari Devi takes upon herself the decision to write her own story. She writes about herself and her body, She writes because she feels that she finally has to talk about her struggles and challenges; she feels the need to purge out her internalized emotions and reclaim her voice and body through writing. It is only through this that she can finally be herself, she can fully be her own, her story is hers, written by her for her and no man will ever be able to portray her as she can portray herself because her experiences are hers and her plight is hers and it is she alone who can portray herself the way she wants to be portrayed and that is her truest self "woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and history.

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