

RELOCATING NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIAN WOMEN'S IDENTITY THROUGH RASHSUNDARI DEBI

Manvi Singh

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi

Abstract: Women authors of exhortatory texts clearly accepted the need to bring about change in lifestyles and all that this world entail. In this context, the personal narrative of women become particularly important as it provides many important insights into attitudes, perceptions as well as anxieties and fear. Women from very early age are reminded that femininity implied chastity, obedience and docility. Nineteenth century Bengal witnessed substantial number of change. Through women's writings we become aware of well-articulated dismay at an unfair social order as well as unjust social practices such as Sati or widow immolation on the husband's funeral pyre, child marriage and violence (physical as well as mental) against them. Apart from nationalist struggle, nineteenth century was also a period which saw various women's personal narratives or writings from middle class strata of society, which include Rashsundari Debi as well who was the first Bengali woman among women to write autobiography *Amar Jiban* (My Life, 1876) in an Indian language (Bengali). A persistent tenacious sense of her individual identity, one that she struggles to hold onto in the most adverse of circumstances, is a striking feature of her narrative. The paper will highlight her account that attest to the unjust social conditions in which women lived in the nineteenth century India: child marriage, forcible separation from one's natal family, adjusting to the unknown environment of the in-laws' house, the risk to one's health of repeated childbirth and heavy domestic labor, and no access to education or resources for individual betterment. Therefore, Rashsundari Debi's resistance to this patriarchal system lay in her learning to read and write; her emancipation lay in the act of writing her own life. These kinds of narratives not only inspire women to pursue their dreams but also reveal the troubles that women have to face to get themselves recognized as an identity distinct from men.

Keywords: Rashsundari Debi, *Amar Jiban*, Patriarchy, Women's Writings, Subordination, Identity, Recognition.

Introduction: Autobiographies, journals, and diaries are important in the lives of a range of individuals. They not only document events but record in detail feelings and attitudes. A close reading of many of the present texts helps in a reconstruction of femininity as seen from the point of view of the object and especially woman identity which is always subordinated, now becomes a mediating subject. Patriarchy under colonialism may have been strengthened as native male elites constructed the home in opposition to the world. The introduction of learning through western institutions implied not only adoption of new teaching methods, with its new content but also of an underlying ideology. Under white men's burden, native elite men internalized Victorian attitude towards women which according to them is vital for the development of a right kind of Bengali gentlewoman. Such a woman was to be a helpmate and an intelligent companion to her husband, who was caught up in the stormy days of social and occupational change.

Apart from recovering the lives of women under colonialism it's more important to look lives that are trapped under native males especially from within structures of domesticity. Despite the emergence of education for both the sexes by English missionaries, there were some sections of women which were completely neglected as they belong to untouchable community and neither missionaries nor Rashsundari's narrative paid any heed to these issues. Rashsundari's writing is a rare and early example of quest of individual woman's devotion articulated in her own words but on the other hand it's significant to look why only she got the chance of writing in an unequal society. What were the

resources available to her at that time that could have produced this desire to write and publish and what are the new outlook from which we can read women's lives, women's writing and their identity in public sphere?

Rashsundari Debi was born in the small village of East Bengal in Hindu upper caste Vaishnava landowning family in 1809. She lost her father at very early age in her life, and that is why, she was very close to her mother but deeply resented her in-laws' behavior when she was not allowed to go to her natal home to take care of her mother when she lay dying. She asserted in her autobiography that had she been a man, surely she would not have been denied the right to fulfill this basic human duty. This show her great desire to get rid of her own identity (as a woman) and not to face the troubles that other women of her time must be experiencing. In her two-part autobiography, she has described how her mother used to dress her in a black *ghagra* (skirt) and *chunari* (veil) to avoid her to get bullied by the little girls of the locality and often used to send her to sit with the boys of the village who attended the *pathshala*, run in one of the outer rooms of her house. This was around 1816, when she observed and try to memorize the Bengali and Persian alphabets that pupils were made to write by the English missionary woman but it was closed down when fire devastated her house. As she was a girl, she was not even allowed to handle quill or a palm leaf, reflecting terrible and adverse circumstances in which women lived and because of illiteracy they were repressed by orthodox society. But on the other hand, it also shows how at least she has been given a chance to experience the joy of words which was not even seen necessary for women of lower strata of the society and moreover, in her house there was no male head for long period, therefore it resulted in liberation for her and her mother.

In the same liberal mindset family, she herself volunteer to do household chores which eventually became nightmare for her when she entered her in-laws' house where she was treated just like any other lower class woman of the nineteenth century burdened with infinite workload.

In the nineteenth century Indian women were accepted or rather envisioned as embodiment of combined virtues of a self-sacrificing Hindu women and a helpmate role of the Victorian lady. As was the custom of her time and her caste, she was married off in a zamindar family of Faidpur at the tender age of twelve years in 1822. Cohabitation was ritually approved from the onset of puberty by the orthodox society, often when girl's body was not mature enough to sustain sexual penetration. Therefore, women have to accept whatever their fate is and largely their fate is governed by orthodox men. She described her acts of cooking and feeding as hard work, also there is a moving description of how she had found no time for a single meal for two whole days. This also reflects the psyche of society, especially of her in-laws', for whom the new member in the family is seen as a "servant", and in the words of Debi, she was in "cage", "prison" acting as a "slave".

If kitchen was a cage, so was the sexual body of a young and beautiful woman like her. Between the age of eighteen and forty-one, Rashsundari bore twelve children and assumed the responsibility of running a large, multigenerational household at the age of fourteen. This reflect that woman of nineteenth century was seen as a birth machine, she is never treated as a subject rather always an object in the companionship. And this treatment was not restricted to her section of women, but prevalent to most of the women of every section. There was no question of consent, choice, cancelling the tie or shifting to another partner. Marital rape was not even seen as an issue in the nineteenth century which most women faced of her time. She regrets that her identity is limited to being the other and a wife. Due to various household responsibilities, she was not allowed to visit her natal house not even at the time when her mother was dying. In distress, she lamented,

Why was I born a member of the female sex?... had I been a boy and had news of my mother's condition, then no matter where I had been, like a bird I would have flown to her side. What am I to do now! I am a caged bird. (24)

Debi's memoirs are alive with the tensions and anguish she had to silently bear. She turned spiritual, as a source of comfort from a life of dependence and subordination. When she was a young child, her

mother had instilled in her a deep love for God. The satisfaction she achieved through personalized devotion and the worship of Lord Krishna appeared to compensate in part for a life of drudgery and inequality. Religion gave her a sense of self-worth, an identity. But Vaishnavism, which she practiced, is privileged with erotic mode and various esoteric cults which she made no reference of it in her narrative. This could be also looked as she is following the norms of the society, as orthodox society of nineteenth century didn't allow women to talk about sexuality and she precisely did the same in her work. No doubt religion gave her freedom and strength to pursue her dreams but she didn't show any aggressive or revolutionary kind of narratives in her work.

Then one night Rashsundari had a dream that she was reading the Chaitanya Bhagavat, the first Bengali biography of the medieval saint Lord Chaitanya, the ardent follower of Lord Krishna, whose mission was salvation of such marginalized social groups as women and lower castes. She felt sure that her quest would be realized now that she had dreamt of reading a book which she had not even seen. However, the problem remained of being able to identify the book; she prayed once again to *parameshwar*, and a few days later, whilst she was cooking, her husband called out to her eldest son Bipin saying that he had left his copy of the Chaitanya Bhagavat near the kitchen. Delighted, Rashsundari quickly found the opportunity to rush out and take a good look at the book, even managed to take out one of its pages. She hid this in the kitchen and started comparing its words with the words that her son wrote in his notebook to get the knowledge of it.

I used to look once at that Palmyra leaf, then at the page from the book and compare the two. In addition, I used to try and recall the alphabet as well as observe the words spoken by others. Many days went by in this manner. Because I was a woman I was reduced to this state. Like a thief I was locked up; but did this also mean that it was a fault to be educated?... whatever I learnt was thanks to *parameshwar*. (45)

Therefore, she secretly taught herself to read at the age of twenty-five and to write at the age of fifty, defying social conventions and obstacles. But reading of Chaitanya Bhagavat was available to lower class and women only because it was not considered highly religious texts among Hindu Vaishnava, therefore her act of choosing this text was again not something radical, if she would have chosen Ramayana in place of it. Her sole purpose was to create her own identity apart from what society has given her. But critic like, Partha Chatterjee also revealed in his book *The Nation and its Fragments: colonial and post colonial histories*, that Rashsundari's narratives are self-absorbed that they ignore other issues that were prevailing in nineteenth century such as Nationalism struggle which emerged as a fire in Bengal and untouchability which was rampant, for instance, the highly organized peasant agitation against the arbitrary ceases and rent-enhancements that a group of landlords has imposed on tenants in Pabna, the untouchable cultivator castes of Faridpur had gone on strike to improve their low ritual status and had refused to work for the upper-caste gentry. This could be because she herself belonged to a landlord's daughter and a landlord's wife, and doesn't want to revolt against her own section of society.

Orthodox Hindu of those times believed that a literate woman was destined to be a widow or if a woman was educated, she must be immoral. Rashsundari lost her husband when she was fifty-two and a year later she completed the first part of her autobiography. Her husband is only a shadowy figure in her account. There is a passing description of his physical appearances, in the fifteenth composition. She has stated in her work that her husband didn't feel that it was his duty to educate his wife or bring her out of the house; although nineteenth century was a great period which had seen new inventions and progress in India especially in the field of education but her husband was not influenced by the new values of the times.

Apart from child marriage and other kinds of oppression against women in the nineteenth century, there was also an issue raised, as Ashis Nandy has reflected in his essay "The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in British India (1983)" of Sati System that was seen as woman's obedience towards her husband even after his death by burning herself while her husband's cremation. But there is no evidence of such practice in her autobiography; rather when her husband died, her head was shaved

in keeping with the humiliating customs of the times, which, for her is 'more painful than dead'. She writes, 'Toward the end of my life I have been widowed. I feel ashamed and hurt by the realization that even if a woman has lived her life fully, has brought up her children and leaves behind her sons and daughters to carry on, her widowhood is still considered a misfortune.' Hence her dignity or to be more precise her identity, has been dependent on some or the other person in her life, and this can be seen with most of the women of nineteenth century, reflecting pain of subordination and repression by orthodox society so that they can never speak up.

Amar Jiban is written in two parts, first part published in 1876 and second in 1906, in which Jyotirindranath Tagore, brother of Rabindranath Tagore, wrote the preface. The tone of it is understatement and restraint, but what emerges is a clear indictment of the way Bengali society in her time treated women like her. Brooding and introspective in style, revolving around themes of fear, obedience, pain, submission, and humility, it provides insights into Debi's life and offers reflection on the contemporary social practices. The second part contains her eulogies to God and describe her spiritual yearning and complete surrender to her Lord. According to Tanika Sarkar, Rashsundari's life was meant to be read as if it was enclosed within a divine purpose, as almost an extension of God's own life.

She begins to write when her one of the sons insisted to write a letter to him. But only fewer women were exposed to education and only a fraction had the confidence to express themselves. Some flourished and blossomed in the newly found freedom which literacy brought; others wrote of their grief and of their sorrow. For women like her, it was access to the male preserve of learning which helped them give expression to their feelings. A close reading of *Amar Jiban* reveals the development of a strong minded woman, who while "dying of fear" was capable of doing something which might well have brought ignominy on the family. By the time she was actually able to read, the education of women and young girls had started taking tentative roots. Raja Rammohun, the Brahmo Samaj, Iswar Chandra and many others from within and outside had challenged several notions and beliefs about women. These liberal reformers also believed in the modern pedagogical principle that is, an enlightened mother was the best early guide for education as well as for morals of the new generation.

Amar Jiban is an assertion of defiance in the face of a masculine order which renders women as faceless and voiceless. Some critics have also stated that her narrative is a celebration of the patient and long-suffering Bengali housewife and other people appear simply to make a very specific point about her and then they disappear. They don't have an independent life of their own within her text, nor do they live out relationships with one another. Autobiography, as a genre, most obviously confuses the boundaries between the inner world and the outside world, by deluding us that it is a life we are reading and not the text.

Nonetheless, her account attests to the unjust social conditions in which women lived in the nineteenth century India: child marriage, forcible separation from one's natal family, adjusting to the unknown environment of the in-laws' house, the risk to one's health of repeated childbirth and heavy domestic labor, and no access to education or resources for individual betterment. Therefore, Rashsundari Debi's resistance to this patriarchal system lay in her learning to read and write; her emancipation lay in the act of writing her own life. These kinds of narratives not only inspire women to pursue their dreams but also reveal the troubles that women have to face to get themselves recognized as an identity distinct from men. Therefore, Rashsundari Debi not only dared to create her own identity distinct from the oppressive society, also got worldwide recognition for her act of writing autobiography. She is an outstanding example of how woman in oppressive social conditions defied formidable obstacles to attain their desired goals. Hence, these kind of radical narratives lead to fresh areas of enquiry which will provide new insights into situations and relationships during a vital phase of the country's history.

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