



Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* and the Subjectivity-Construction Narrative

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Abstract:

Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, is a watershed moment in developing the Indian literary journey and feminism. It chronicles a traditionally submissive Bengali woman's fight to overcome her ignorance to become literate against the backdrop of her colonial-era male upholders. The study “Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* and the Subjectivity-Construction Narrative” examines how the intersection of literacy and dedication results in a subjectivity that, while seemingly mundane, actually represents a radical departure from our traditional understanding of how identities are formed. The paper centres on Rassundari Devi's description of the times when she struggled to define. She had to face the pressure from her family and society to maintain her subjectivity firmly planted in housework. Self-expression and self-fashioning through writing propelled her out of the confining confines of her prescribed duty as a housewife and into the vast realm of the public sphere.

Keywords:

Amar Jiban, Autobiography, Feminism, Narrative, Colonial Era, Rassundari Devi, Self, Subjectivity, Woman.



At an advanced age, Rassundari Devi wrote the first autobiography by a woman in Bengali. She did nothing remarkable or noteworthy in her lifetime to come to the limelight apart from her dream of educating herself. Women's education was taboo in India then, and the gendered roles did not allow women the space and the time to get themselves self-educated when chances of public education for women were nil. So the modern reader, as s/he encounters the life narrative of Rassundari Devi, becomes fascinated by the contrast between the banality of her life and the extraordinary nature of her accomplishment, given the constraints of the colonial male-chauvinist culture into which she was born. Although the author has to realise how her book functions as a social document, it is more than simply the articulation of one Hindu woman; it speaks for women of her period. Rassundari Devi chronicles her life without realising the more significant political intervention she is making for women throughout Indian history.

Scholars and academics have only recently begun recognising women's autobiographies' significance. Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, has the simple and plain title *My Life* in English. The author makes no scholarly claims in the work, and neither shows any vanity of being a self-educated lady when most of her peers were uneducated and merely obsessed with the household works into which they were being pushed from their childhood. She had chronicled her life before there was even a theory of autobiographies, much less a theory of women's autobiographies. The existence of a healthy sense of self is, as Gusdorf explains in his crucial article "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," a necessary condition for writing an autobiography – "Autobiography is impossible in a cultural landscape where the consciousness of self does not exist properly" (Gusdorf 30).

Feminists, however, have challenged this individualistic autobiography theory, arguing that it fails to account for the unique experiences of women and other marginalised groups. Friedman has criticised the Gusdorfian model in her essay "Women's autobiographical selves: Theory and Practice," in which she argues:



The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not consider the importance of group identity for women and minorities. Secondly, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialisation in constructing male and female gender identity. From 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)

Friedman's theory provides a valuable framework for recognising the gender-based differences in the foundations upon which male and female selves are built and the roles they play in society. Autobiographical writing by women is informed not by the concept of a strongly individualistic self but by the idea of a relational identity, which in turn nurtures a sense of self and subjectivity. In the case of *Amar Jiban*, where the author's concept of self can be regarded as produced through connection and relationship with divinity, this theory is particularly pertinent. Writing is seen as an act of god's grace in which the person is sublimated into a higher metaphysical plane, making it more challenging to carve out the harsh limits of an egocentric self. Thus the layers of complexity are more challenging to decipher as there are multiple levels of victimisation, suppression and oppression that women have to deal with to form a coherent subjectivity.

Rassundari Devi's narrative focuses primarily on her journey to literacy. Her mother taught her the mantra "Daya Madhav" at a young age to help her overcome her natural aversion to strangers. (Devi 25). This conception of God as an individual imprints itself permanently on her mind:

"I had no idea 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 much moral courage. Since that day, I could begin to understand many



things...whenever I was scared, I would think of him. My mother's words made a permanent impression on me—Mother said God is with us” (Devi 30).

Rassundari spends the first few chapters reminiscing about her time in her mother's house, surrounded by people she loved deeply, including her *pishi*(her father's sister), her younger brother, her uncle, her playmates, her mother and others. She also details how she became an expert housekeeper and married at the tender age of twelve. Her upbringing at home with her mother profoundly affects her sense of identity and subjectivity about her community and the deity (Sarkar, 2016). Participation in and contribution to the various activities taking place within the household, such as playing with her playmates, caring for her kauri-ma and her child, cooking, and sitting along with the boys in the Bengali school that was run in her house, all contribute to the development of a sense of a self that is deeply intertwined with others. She smiles as she thinks back on those times:

“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 family members” (Devi 32).

In all these recollections, there is little evidence of a self, constructed along individualistic lines. Her words convey a strong sense of one's identity being nurtured and preserved. Rassundari Devi's identity was intricately intertwined with those of her loved ones. Her marriage represents a turning point: it separates her from her mom's side of the family. She turns to her "Daya Madhav" to help her get through the pain of being cut off from her mother and other loved ones. The only way she can make peace with her new reality is to accept it as God's will. On the road to her in-laws, she notices a lack of familiar faces and experiences a pang of melancholy -

“When I woke up the following day, I was 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, and my playmates. Where were they now, and where was I?” (Devi 36).



Rassundari is uncomfortable being with these new people. Without her friends and family, she loses much of her sense of self and has to immerse herself in household chores, as is expected from a newlywed girl. Her sense of self includes her loved ones, neighbours, and acquaintances. In this sense, identity differs from how autobiography theories typically define it, in which identity and subjectivity are taken for granted and serve as the bedrock into which the autobiographical narrative is etched. In his memoirs, Gusdorf claims, "the individual reflects his image in the mirror" (Gusdorf 33). This idea of Gusdorf's has been challenged by Benstock, who writes,

"But this definition of autobiography overlooks what might be the most exciting 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).

For instance, in Rassundari Devi's work, the self is not explicitly distinguished from extra personal factors. In *Amar Jiban*, the individual is inextricably intertwined with society and divinity. However, her poetry demonstrates a swaying pendular movement between the realisation of an imprisoned self and the realisation of a self intertwined with God. The former expresses a more autonomous sense of identity and emphasises connections. Gusdorf's theory of autobiographical narrative hinges on the rigidity of the separation between the self and the other and, by extension, the public and the private, the centre and the margin, etc. Rassundari Devi's narrative challenges and contradicts this premise -

"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).



Her story seems to operate on two levels: a sensation of being trapped and a resignation to the will of God, as though the very urge to assert the self is immediately rejected by a surrender of the individual to the broader purpose of God. She expresses the perspective of an imprisoned woman; the image of the caged bird appears again in her story, but she cannot free herself from her situation through active defiance. She bemoans that she was born a female, especially after relating how she was forbidden from seeing her dying mother. The way she puts it is:

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

During her stay at her in-law’s house during the initial days, she talked about having established personal communication with God. She says, “But I never talked to anyone except God, and that was a silent communication” (Devi 39).

She owes her capacity to take care of the housework to divine favour, as any good *bhakt* would, seeing God’s hand in everything. However, there are hints of dissatisfaction throughout the autobiography, mainly when she discusses the discrimination against women in the past that prevented them from receiving an education. There is a note of melancholy in her voice as she describes her feelings of helplessness in the face of discriminatory social and cultural prescriptions for women:

“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).

Overhearing the male members of her household, she learned that women were not allowed to read since doing so would make them too much like males. Her quest to learn more



about religion initially piques her interest in the letters. She prays to her god like she has done before, for guidance as she studies reading. She applauds the trend toward educating more women as a sign that times have changed. Here, the religious yearning to read Vaishnava scriptures and open a doorway to God through the written word takes precedence over the more personal want to blossom as an individual through the act of literacy. A girl's overpowering need to learn to read and write is stymied by the fact that she is a girl.

Given that being a woman is an integral part of who she is, it is not surprising that this aspect of her identity, her womanly self, is constrained by the social prescriptions of her times. What follows is the concept of a self that fights to be born in its struggle against the patriarchal forces that impose a social self at odds with one's true self -

“After some time, the desire to learn to read correctly grew very strong. 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).

Women in ancient times were socially restricted in ways that the suppressed self of Rassundari Devi desperately sought escape. The metaphors of the imprisoned bird and the fish caught in the net show how Rassundari Devi, a Hindu upper-caste illiterate housewife, seeks to carve herself a place within the confines of domesticity that she cannot escape. Even while she never expresses her fury in political terms and attempts to make peace with her situation by viewing it as a divinely-ordained plan, the resentment that simmers just below the surface of her words is easy to understand.

Being torn between the want to stand up for herself and the urge to lose herself in the divine creates tension in her sense of self; she attempts to find a solution to her problems by channelling her thirst for knowledge through spiritual means. The Chaitanya Bhagvata is a foundational text of Bengal Vaishnavism based on the life of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and she



has a very suggestive dream in which she sees herself reading it one day, lending divine validation to her desire to learn, not to achieve any individualistic ambitions but to read books on religion.

Rassundari Devi's subjectivity is nourished within a religious setting but ultimately finds its way into the wider public arena through her writing and publication. An extraordinary journey of a woman whose sense of self, though 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 victimisation at the hands of patriarchy, in whatever euphemistic terms it may be stated, is symbolised by the stealth with which she attempts to learn the letters of the Bengali alphabet in the confines of her kitchen (Malhotra, 2016). From these lines, it is clear that she feels she has violated some unspoken female code:

“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 differed from the present ones. We were entirely under the control of men” (Devi 52).

She often says she wishes she had been born a man instead of a woman. She is cognizant that her gender makes it more challenging for her to pursue education. To fully grasp the significance of this insight is to create a sense of subjectivity that is aware of its oppression yet powerless to overcome it. What does she have to say?

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

She goes on to explain how word of her reading skills spread to the rest of the community, at first to a select few and then to everyone in her household, and she expresses her gratitude to



God for being her teacher, without whose assistance she would never have been able to accomplish such a feat.

Thus, *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Devi charts the development of her subjectivity across the highs and lows of her life; what remains consistent is the idea of a relational self that gets built via association and connectedness rather than the declaration of individualism. Relationships with others, both human and divine, demonstrate that the self is not a given but something to be built.

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