

An Indomitable Urge to Penetrate the World of Words: Reading *Amar Jiban* in South Asian Context

SRIJA SANYAL

Born into a society vehemently opposed to female education, Rassundari Devi (1810-1899) was a woman of her own kind at the time. The proposed essay intends to discuss Devi's autobiographical account, *Amar Jiban* (My Life, 1876), in the context of the broader South Asian framework and how it stood not only as a testament of the women's position at the time but also reflected on the struggles that women were to undertake in the time that followed. Being the first ever full-length autobiography in the Bangla literary space, *Amar Jiban* received praise and warm welcome, especially so as it was authored by a woman with extremely restricted economic means in a time when female literacy was not even a spared thought. Apart from this fact, what makes the autobiography a valuable treasure is its commentary on the changing times of the then Bengal and the author's own viewpoints on the same. The paper will primarily focus on this narrative that runs through the text, which, at that point of time, echoed the voice of dissent in a heteronormative environment characterized by imperialism and reigned by the upholders of patriarchy. The paper further extends its cynosure to the realm of a fierce struggle of creating an identity of her own, as undertaken by Devi herself in her lifetime, and her enduring experiences as a reflection of the striving of women writers in the time to come. The paper shall culminate the discussion by tracing the economic and social vulnerabilities, and socio-religious-political constructs behind these vulnerabilities, which restrict women's voices while situating Devi's struggle as a universal one rather than individual in wider South Asian narrative of both women writers and their writings.

Introduction

The urge to write is a natural one, which, surprisingly and strangely, like many other aspects, has always been restricted to the menfolk. This is perhaps the foremost challenge that a "writer with the female gender" has to face while attempting to penetrate an area which has predominantly been a male one. This becomes quintessentially explicit when one notices the paucity of autobiographies of women in the literary canon, as transcribing experiences of a woman's life has often been deemed as unnecessary as her existence itself. Meenakshi Malhotra in her book *Representing Self, Critiquing Society: Selected Lifewritings by Women*, wonders whether autobiographies are always gendered and argues that texts are always gender-marked, i.e., the gender of the writer or subject is perceptible and can be discerned through the writing. This is not to say that the act of writing is biologically determined or to say that there is a distinct and discernible feminine style. But, as Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) argues that the stress falls differently with a woman (Woolf, Orlando).

This essay intends to discuss Devi's autobiographical account, *Amar Jiban* (My Life, 1876), in the context of the broader South Asian framework to explore how it not only stood as a testament of the women's position of the time but also how it reflected the

struggles that women were to undertake at the time that followed. Being the first ever full-length autobiography in the Bangla literary space, *Amar Jiban* received praise and warm welcome, especially so as it was authored by a woman with extremely restricted economic means at a time when female literacy was not even a spared thought. However, what makes the autobiography a valuable treasure is its commentary on the changing times of the then Bengal and the author's own viewpoints on the same. The narrative that runs through the text, echoed the voice of dissent in a heteronormative environment characterized by imperialism and reigned by the upholders of patriarchy. Devi's writing expressive of the subdued female voice thereby depicts the fierce struggle of creating an identity of her own, very much reminiscent of her personal experiences, and her enduring journey as a reflection of the striving of women writers in the time to come.

Gender, Race, and Class: Bengal and India In South Asian Narratives

A recurring theme that South Asian women writers have consistently been exploring is the doubly marginalization of women. The situation aptly reflects Spivak's attempts to question the ability of the subaltern to speak as the women writer's from the region are marginalized not only because of their gender but also of the class hierarchy established by the first-world countries, which effectively dismisses any account of third-world narratives. In line with this, there undoubtedly exists a significance of women's life narratives for feminist theory. As there exists no universal sisterhood among women, there remains no universal category of women when discussing women's life narratives. Therefore, the cultural assumptions underlying the writings of a white middle-class woman would be different from those underpinning the writings of working-class Jewish women or the life narratives of newly educated Indian women (Malhotra). Furthermore, as Amartya Sen have stressed (Sen), the bases of identity in the modern world is not singular but multiple. The self, therefore, as it unfolds in women's life narratives is not fixed but fluid and flexible (Arneil). As propounded by Lacan in his theory of the mirror phase, the identity is never entire or whole but is always partial and process. Any sense of wholeness or autonomy is a misrecognition. Moreover, the life narratives of many women amply demonstrate the point made by Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) in *The Second Sex* (1949) that gender is purely a social construction. The process of this construction, as represented in both life narratives and autobiographical fiction, focuses on the childhood of the autobiographical subject as crucial and formative.

In the South Asian context, there were many women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, especially in the Bengal province, who transcribed their childhood days in the ink and paper. As Bengal, along with the Madras presidency, were among the forerunners in receiving reformist tides toward women's education, they were also witness to a proliferating print culture. Certain common elements, such as a sense of the carefree nature of childhood, unencumbered by the bonds which were to tie women down in their later life, run extensively through these narratives. In Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, she relates her heart-wrenching separation from her mother, which, in a way, also resonate (to a great extent) the several pages in the novel *Subarnalata* (1967), where there is nothing but immense pain that stretches between *Subarnalata* and her mother, *Satyaboti*. Written by *Ashapura Devi* (1909-1995), a pivotal name in the Bengali literary space for women writings, was a forerunner in presenting the domestic world of the Bengali women through the might of her pen. Although not a transcriber of autobiography, through *Subarnalata*, Devi somehow echoes what *Rassundari Devi* echoes

several years earlier in her form of writing. Dominated by an acute sense of nostalgia and loss, the narrative is heavily agonized with respect to outlining an all-women experience. While childhood is narrated in many life writings by men, they are seldom marked by this sense of loss or pain as they are in women's life writings (Malhotra). In *Amar Jiban*, Devi further narrates her helplessness on not being able to visit her dying mother, "I was like a bird in a cage, an oil-presser's bullock" (Tharu and Lalita). She, like many other writers, bemoans her fate of being born a girl: "Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life! A mother is the most affectionate person in the world, the representative of God on earth – and I could not even be of any use to her. My grief knew no bounds. If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother's bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird" (Chatterjee). This trope of loss is manifested even in the writings of prominent and affluent women belonging from the first-world. For instance, Beauvoir wrote of her mother's death (and) said that in spite of the pain it was an easy one: an upper-class death. Outside, for the poor, dying is a different matter (Steedman).

The life narratives of women can be witnessed as powerful social documents, as well as a testimonial to the history of the 'fairer sex'. They thus hold great archival value as they offer micro-histories by focusing on the individual narratives amidst the broader framework, which, consequently, draws a wide variety of shades on the canvas as each of the narratives stand out distinctively from the other despite being dominated by certain common elements binding them together. According to Malhotra, narratives that emerge from a historically deprived perspective have greater epistemological validity than knowledge that emerges from a privileged position and perspective (Malhotra). This resonates the fact that those in a position of privilege are unlikely or at least less likely to experience caste, class or gender-based oppression as compared to those who have been traditionally subjected to such discrimination, which often have a violent history associated with them. Therefore, it becomes imperative that the writings chronicling such experiences will bear the ramifications of agonized real-life accounts and hence will offer new insights into the question of identity. For instance, in the Indian context, authors like Bama and Baby Kamble think of identity in terms of the community and not in an individual or autonomous way. Instead, their subjectivity is produced in terms of their subjection and subjugation, wherein the basis of this identity is collective and social (Malhotra). This, consequently, also partially rejects the statement of individuality as a necessary prerequisite for autobiography, thus ushering a sense of community or solidarity. In line with this, women's autobiographies have also offered a critique of rationality as a ruse of patriarchy. French feminists and feminist psycho-linguists, most notably, Irigaray, have even critiqued language as patriarchal.

***Amar Jiban*: Documenting Women's Condition**

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* is a document of the women's condition in South Asia in general and in Bengal, in particular. In the autobiography, she uses her hard-earned, and hard-won (to a great extent), literacy as a remarkable tool for self-discovery. And therefore, it can be rightfully said that perhaps no other autobiography dramatizes the question of women's access to language the way *Amar Jiban* does. The entire narrative that runs throughout the text echoes the daring step that a woman in the 19th century undertook towards penetrating the world of words, at a time when women's literacy was not even a spared thought. Rassundari secretly learnt to read in a near-impossible circumstance of the '*andarmahal*' (inner chambers) at the age of twenty-five – this is possibly the only

'noteworthy' event in her life, which was a daring departure in an otherwise humdrum conventional domestic existence (Malhotra).

When western education was introduced in India in the early nineteenth century, the first recipients were the middle-class boys and the men as it was perceived as a necessary prerequisite for availing the opportunities offered by the colonial administration. However, along with the west wind of education, what also ushered in was the wave of reformist ideologies that attempted to uproot the dilapidated didactic. As Karlekar puts it, a wide cross-section of individuals became concerned with women's emancipation, and questions related to the function of the new education and how it could adapt to other predominant requirements such as feminine seclusion, division of labor within the home were hotly debated (Karlekar). Consequently, by the late nineteenth century, most notably Bengal, along with Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, witnessed the establishments of schools for women. However, the primary goal of the offered education, largely, geared itself with the construction of the woman as a companion within the institution of the marriage. In line with this, the women's education or '*strishiksha*' was being constructed in a context that was driven by the needs and interests of upper class/caste males. Such an argument gets its fair representation in various works of Bangla literature, which satirizes a woman who misuses her newly acquired literate status and forsakes her domesticity, thus becoming a '*bibi*'. Along with this existed the societally ingrained fear of being widowed – a woman who knows to read is fated to be widowed. It is this fear that Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925) attempts to refute in his introduction to Rassundari Devi's autobiography. At the same time, Tanika Sarkar's argument that "we need to seek the impulse for '*strishiksha*' more in the social understanding of Indian reformers and of women themselves rather than any modernizing impulse of the colonial government" (Sarkar, *On Re-reading the Text*), becomes quite significant in the context. For instance, as she further asserts, when faced with a financial or political crisis, women's education seems to have been one of the first casualties. In a nutshell, the idea of woman was constructed, quite cleverly, through education, to represent the pure spiritual inner self as opposed to the colonized public domain. For one, this metaphoric and metonymic relationship between women and the 'uncolonized' spiritual domain of pure 'Indian' culture tended to fix many emancipated and educated women into an ideological straitjacket where they tended to ventriloquise and replicate their male counterparts (Malhotra).

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, however, situates in a period prior to social reform and is her aspiration to literacy forms the cynosure of the manuscript. Her God, Dayamadhab, and her mother, become the two pillars of her experiences, structuring her identity extensively. Married to a family where reading for women was a forbidden thought, her desire to be lettered could only be nurtured in utmost secrecy. In Sixth Composition, she recounts her desire to read was actually catalyzed by a dream in which she saw herself reading Chaitanya Bhagawat: "*One day I dreamt that I was reading the Chaitanya Bhagavata. When I woke up I felt enthralled. I closed my eyes to go over the scene. It seemed that I was already in possession of something precious. My body and my mind swelled with satisfaction. It was so strange! I had never seen the book yet I had been reading it in my dream. For an illiterate person like me, it would have been absolutely impossible to read such a difficult book. Anyhow I was pleased that I was able to perform this impossible feat at least in a dream. My life was blessed! God had at last listened to my constant appeals and had given me the ability to read in my dream*" (Rachel Fell McDermott). However, the onus of domestic sphere and child rearing was such that she once went without food for days, as she recollects in Fifth Composition: "*... on many occasions I was forced to go without food.*" Sarkar, in her translation of the text,

titled *Words to Win* (1999) comments on this custom in the section on “Food and Eating in the Woman’s Life”: “Amar Jiban establishes a very peculiar relationship between the woman and the food she cooked and served”, wherein women’s consumption pattern and hours both are severely restricted and also ignored, so much so that it becomes an unaccounted event amidst the hullabaloo of the household chores. Yet, her words represented not an isolated instance as women’s responsibilities were strenuously demanding within the domestic walls. Noted reformist Anandibai Karve (1866-1950), also known to all as Baya Karve, writes in her autobiography *Maze Puran* (My Saga, 1944) that the responsibilities of running a household befell on her eleven year old shoulders, wherein her duties were not limited to just cleaning the house or cooking the food but also demanded an active involvement in religious rituals and their meticulous preparation, while also participating in outdoor activities, including tending livestock and supervising workers in the fields. This, in turn, effectively ensured that womenfolk of the household, trapped within the domestic walls, had hardly any time or the energy to pursue their academic or any other interests. The constraints were set upon the women by social concepts of what is ‘proper’ and what is not, all situated within the four-walls of the household, wherein ‘she’ is quintessential to its functioning yet invisible and the most neglected element.

Tanika Sarkar points out that Rassundari, simultaneously, occupied “two very different sites: that, of a conformist housewife in an orthodox family and of an early woman author, engaged in the highly public audacious act of writing about her life” (Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*). The relation between the two sites – and identities – is highly problematic since literate women were assumed to be faced by imminent widowhood, as previously mentioned. The autobiographical act in Rassundari’s case entailed at least, therefore, three sets of actual and potential transgressions. One was the breaking of the taboo on reading and writing; the second was the implicit interrogation of the private/public dichotomy; and the third was the choice of an idiom of devotion – within the space offered by Vaishnav “bhakti” as a choice of religious affiliation – which permits, and thus opens up a terrain for the articulation of self and agency (Malhotra). Interestingly, initiatives taken by her are also viewed as instances of divine intervention. As Tanika Sarkar points out, it was as if the two levels – God’s and devotee’s – were intertwined within a single narrative frame, interanimating each other (Sarkar, *On Re-reading the Text*). However, as further stated by Malhotra, Rassundari’s devotion, ultimately, is a very private and individual matter. Quite intelligently, the marker of the devotional trajectory that she adopts is not a ritual penance but something more intellectual. It should be noted in this context that the forms of female worship, both as a devotee and a deity, is expressed, and extensively geared, to the maintenance of the existing social system – which, unquestionably refers to the well-being of the husbands/household and the avoidance of widowhood – the ultimate hated and most feared moment in a Hindu woman’s life. However, Rassundari seems to view this upholding of the prevalent social system and the onus of maintaining the ritualistic purity befalling on women, with enough suspicion, especially because the prescribed roles are deriving from the traditional mapping of a woman’s life-cycle. Although moved by her first-pregnancy, she later regrets the subsumation of all other aspects of identity into the role of a mother (Malhotra). Similarly, she deconstructs and demystifies both the “iconic figure of feminine nurture” and the maternal image by characterizing her service to the family idol, her endless cooking and feeding as physically laborious work (Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*), thus creating the space of ‘reproductive labor’

that is enforced rather than embraced as a fulfilling experience. In the Fourth Composition, she refers to the 'caged bird' repeatedly, echoing her inner self enforced to reside within a restricted space: "*Only God will understand the predicament I was in – nobody else can have any idea. Even now I remember those days. The caged bird, the fish caught in the net.*" In another instance, she recalls, "*people put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this café for life. I would never be freed*" (Chatterjee).

If the kitchen as a geographical space was a cage, so was her body, which was subjected to bear children almost every year, as she chronicles in the Fifth Composition: "*my first child was born when I was eighteen and the last when I was forty-one. God only known what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either*" (Chatterjee). It is only when she reaches middle age that Rassundari experiences a kind of relief following the cessation of the reproductive cycle, which, she again attributes to the divine intervention and expresses her gratitude toward the divinity. As Malhotra reflects upon her this state, praising God for the perfect fit between the body and its changing functions, she defamiliarized the female life cycle – the familiar body is made strange exotic and holy, the sign and site of God's handiwork. In the version of herself Rassundari hence creates the absences, silences and erasures, with an acute sense of 'lack of lamentation', which becomes one of the highlights of the narrative. It seems that her life writing 'resists' her lived life more than it reflects it (Sarkar, *On Re-reading the Text*). She herself, thus, establishes her identity as a wife, mother, and a householder, as a less significant one than Rassundari as a Vaishnava devotee and emergent neophyte (Malhotra). With such a stance, it is her spiritual quest that she aligns with her desire to be familiarize with letters that is posited as real, which ultimately offers, in her views, a possibility for articulating self and agency: "*How amazing! Who has made me fearless? Now I fear nothing*" (Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*). Also, the writing of spiritual autobiography wrenches her out of her lonely bound context and puts her in the category of devotees of a higher order. Hagiography and autobiography flow into each other so that there is no sense of disjunction in the last sections of the autobiography that describe events from the various incarnations of Vishnu (Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*). Here, religion is therefore used as an idiom to offer a space for the articulation of self, to offer a sense of stability and continuity to a self which is often discontinuous and fragmented. The narrative has a modern quality of self-absorption and reflexivity as it is her religion that offers and emotional anchor and a structural frame for exploring selfhood (Malhotra).

Critique: Of and By the Text

Rassundari's initial illiteracy could not stop her from materializing a forbidden desire that she longed harbored within herself, which she does by creating a 'Self' to objectify it in her autobiography – a space of her own to narrate not only her own experiences as an individual but also as a part of the bigger whole/community, i.e., the then society. Structure-wise and stylistically, each entry of the autobiography is preceded by a verse composition addressed to Dayamadhab – her supreme lord and underlines the distance and the difference between the writing self and the written self (Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*). Once she locates her-'self' within the narrative, Rassundari employs the duality to pen down with both honesty and objectivity. For instance, her transformation from being a docile housewife on the one hand, and at the same time, unveiling the society that prefers to keep its women chained to the drudgery of housework goes hand in hand to a great extent. Residing within this society that denied

her literacy and glorified her role as a 'devoted home maker' and that of a nurturer, she ultimately achieves self-actualization in the midst of the various conflicts in her life through her writing as she develops and experiences the power of words. There remain various paragraphs where she details about her disapproval of the prevalent norms and how they restrict not only her but the feminine plight from growing as an individual being: *"It would have been most shameful to refer to my eating in public"* (Chatterjee). Asking for food was highly disapproved and ascribed to shame in the nineteenth century Bengal – something that women, right from a young age were diligently taught. This was so ingrained in the psyche of women that they were regimented to ignore their nutrition and love for food. She further goes on to reveal that the sheer lack of aid for sharing the domestic responsibilities compelled her more often than not to go without food for days, as she records that there used to be no one to help her with the chores in the inner quarters except herself. As per the custom, she was laden with not only the domestic chores of the 'andarmahal' but also the child rearing, which was and still is to a great extent, an exclusive periphery for the women in the sense that the responsibility majorly befalls women. Her words, *"... I had no time to think about my own health"* as a consequence of missed meals consecutively for days because of the pressure of the work is both simple yet disturbing to read. The tenure of responsibilities was so strenuous that it used to be next to impossible for a single person to execute all, that too with perfection. And yet, the round-the-clock routine that Rassundari herself was subjected to reflected the greater picture of what the life of the women in general was in the then Bengal: *"I even started cooking before they were up... Then I had to make offerings to the family deity and get ready to prepare the meals for the rest of the family. I had to cook quite a lot – about twelve seers of rice for each meal. The master of the house had to eat his meal of rice just after he had bathed in the morning. He would not eat anything else. So I had to cook specially for him first. In the next round I cooked for the entire family. So it used to be about four in the afternoon before the cooking was done"* (Chatterjee). Even in cases where a young woman was the head of a household she often was deprived of proper food. She would be so laden with household chores and the number of children to look after that there would be no time left for her to have lunch or dinner (Banerjee).

The process of writing her autobiography helped Rassundari Devi to search for her "self" in the society and culture while offering a chance to critique the then society from a feminist lens. The prevalent system's disapproval of women's education is something that she reflects upon in the text, something that is perpetuated by fellow women who acted as mouthpiece and active agents of the patriarchy: *"People used to despise women of learning. How unfortunate those women were, they said. They were no better than animals... 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."* She further goes on to chronicle, *"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 offense. It is such a pleasure to see the women today enjoying so much freedom. These days parents of a single girl child take so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that. That like that I have learned is only because God did me the favor... 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). Her efforts crossing great lengths just to educate herself calls for a special attention indeed while reading the text, especially in the twenty first century where the situation has drastically undergone transformation for women – for both better and the worse. However, as Rassundari, in Sixth Composition points out, *"one needs a lot of things if one*

is to write: paper, pen, ink, ink-pot and so on" and immediately sets the tone for the reader for Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) celebrated and significant essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which also reflects on what exactly a woman needs if she wishes to write down her thoughts – a room of her own! As Tanika Sarkar argues in her essay *On Re-reading the Text*, *Amar Jiban* addresses the problems beyond those that male reformers and orthodoxy were debating. Those latter related to education of women, the abolition of sati, the legalization of widow remarriage, a higher age of consent and the possibility of a higher age of marriage or the right to divorce. Rassundari does talk about education at great lengths, but her other major concerns remain very different, one not frontally addressed by reformers: patrilocalty, housework, single-handed raising of infants, the humiliations that surround widowhood (Sarkar, *On Re-reading the Text*) – things that are innately intimate, thus forming the micro elements of the macro narrative of women's life writings. At the same time, she is somewhat sounding both envious and approved of what is happening to the new-age women, who are having it rather an easy access to the basic that she had to struggle for so much. This duality might be because of the fact that she must design her primary identity, above all, as that of the good wife, - an identity without which her transgression will not be shown to have gone against the grain of her very being – she cannot link herself up within open critiques and proposals for change (Sarkar, *On Re-reading the Text*), and hence, the need for the divine intervention as a trope that justifies the transgression. Delinked, her tone is what Virginia Woolf would describe as "special pleading", a characteristic of much of women's writing. And which Steedman elaborates: "To be resentful and angry in small ways is one form of resistance... However, it is not often called resistance: its more common name is complaint". Noted author, critic and professor Nandita Basu's work in this regard becomes significant as she highlights the internalization of social pressure by Rassundari that acts against her aspiration to literacy as *Amar Jiban* does not directly enter into the larger debates on women's education which were circulating in the public arena by the mid-nineteenth century, something that is resonated by Tanika Sarkar as well. Rassundari has been very firm in her criticism of her time when women were not allowed to read and write even if they had leisure. In those days, women were supposed to wait on the head of the family with bowed heads. Rassundari's comments that women were not supposed to do anything but housework. This was especially true of young brides who had to wear very long veils while doing housework inside the house, and were strictly instructed not to talk to adult makes even if they were member of the family. Only then would she prove herself a good daughter-in-law. Men, and women too, in this would kept on criticizing the idea of women's education (for the idea that *had* arrived), which they lamented would unsettle the status quo in this matter which was perfectly acceptable to them. They thought that once educated, women would start doing the work meant for men and the traditional *bhadralok* would lose his caste. What would a woman do with education they asked – go and earn money? The idea was horrifying. Even Rassundari, when she refers to it, does not question the reason for this horror; on the contrary, she argues that learning brings other blessings too, and is not be necessarily connected with the earning of money (Basu) for the concept of women's economic liberation was an alien one and hence the fear of the unknown directed the conscience of the masses as if warning them of the doomsday. Basu's essay also explicates how Rassundari confers legitimacy on her "transgressive" act by attributing the human drama and her desire to read to divine intervention. Thus, she disconnects herself totally from the satirical figure of the "*Memsahib*" or "*bibi*" ridiculed so often in the contemporary popular culture (Malhotra).

Conclusion

Rassundari Devi's writing was not simply an attempt to express the female voice but goes much beyond it. Much of her concerns about the situation of women, which anticipated the concerns raised in modern European feminist movement, such as the potential transgression entailed in speaking about the taboo of women's access to education, interrogating the dichotomy existing private and the public space of women and their socio-political marginalization marked her attempt to challenge and subvert the patriarchal hegemony of the nineteenth century society.

Ronin Institute, USA

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