

# Two Cheers for Colonial Modernity: Reading Societal Double-Standard and Assertive Femininity in Manada Devi's *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit*

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SHILPI BASAK

**Abstract:** Memoirs, through dealing with the writers' personal memories, also bring to the fore the particular social, political, ethical, religious history of a time where the character(s) of the memoirs belong to. Manada Devi, an early 19th century educated woman from a respectable Bengali upper class family, wrote her memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) in Bengali, (translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha) that focuses on the condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal. The personal memory and the collective memory are interwoven in a texture which reveals the imperative conditions that lead the protagonist 'on the road to sin'. The present paper attempts to examine the patriarchal double-standard and hypocritical liberalism that affects the condition of women across class and caste in the early 19th century Bengal. How different locations, various experiences shape the identity of Manada Devi and how she ends up being 'an educated woman in prostitution' and a witness to the 'real society', as she calls it, will be dealt in detail. Efforts will also be made to highlight the assertive femininity of Manada Devi and her journey to female empowerment which eventually carves a niche of her own identity.

*Keywords:* Autobiography, Manada Devi, patriarchy, female empowerment, colonial modernity

Two cheers are quite enough: There is no occasion to give three.

– E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*

In his book *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (2007), Thomas Larson points out, 'A memoir sounds like a dalliance; there's something purely personal and time-bound about it, like a fall fashion or passing clouds. [...] the memoir feels prey to (or is it desirous of?) immediate emotional memory, almost as if the point is to preserve the evanescent.' (Larson 18) Memoir has obvious sociological implications since it focuses on the times 'in which life is lived and the significant others of the memoirist's world' (Buss in Eakin 68). The present discussion will see and show how in her memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929), originally written in Bangla and later translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha, Manada Devi negotiates her individual self with the larger society of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

There is no denying to the fact that in colonial India, women's autobiographical-writing was an offshoot of Western literary and cultural traditions. Indrani Sen, while commenting on the lives of late 19th and early 20th centuries women with particular reference to *The Memoirs of Haimabati Sen*, rightly argues that women's life-writing was a 'legacy of "colonial modernity", social reform, and in particular, the movement for female education,' and 'was interlinked with western notion of individualism' (Sen 55). In fact, the idea of self-hood or subjectivity, as Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha

comment, 'cannot be separated from the specific historical and political conjunctures that constituted their world.' (Tharu 153) Female subjectivity and female agency predominates the narrative of Manada Devi as she asserts herself through different stages of her life while summarising the significant people and events in her life. Before Manada Devi, we have autobiographies written by Bengali women such as Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876) which, however, in no way challenges the existing patriarchal social structure or questions the hypocrisy and double moral standard as does Manada Devi's narrative.

Time and again, researchers have expressed doubts over the existence of any 'actual' Manada Devi and argue that it might be a figment of imagination. Whether the person is authentic or fabricated, the memoir remains an important historical and sociological document. It gives a nuanced understanding of the prostitution in colonial Bengal because here a prostitute writes her own life narrative. Arunava Sinha, the translator of the memoir, opines that the figure (Manada Devi) is 'a composite of many women who went through similar, harrowing experiences' (*AEWP* 138). The singularity of the memoir lies in the fact that the memoirist does not shy away from talking about such subject matters (like women's sexual desire, their rights etc.) which are always denigrated. As such, the memoir becomes a testimony to a particular period:

The individual incidents as well as the social and psychological commentary are faithful to real life in this period, offering an unusual perspective on a period in which the quest for freedom, progressive ideas and personal education are often considered to have been the drivers of individual and social behaviour. That the sexual instinct intersected with this arc is of particular interest. Indeed, the writer does not claim immunity from it, chastising herself for her moral choices and yet acknowledging that she was unable to resist physical desire. (*AEWP* 139)

Manada Devi, as her memoir claims, was an educated woman from a respectable Bengali upper class family. Her life narrative focuses on the significant events and people in her life that ultimately led her 'on the road to sin' as she herself calls it. Though Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* ('My Story', 1912) was purportedly the first autobiographical account written by a prostitute in Bengal, Manada Devi's memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) or *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* (2021) is significant in its own way particularly because of the juxtaposition of the two words 'educated' and 'prostitution' and the transformation ('becoming') of the central character from a daughter of a respectable Brahmin family to a prostitute. Prior to Manada Devi, we have Nabinkali Devi (a daughter of an influential Brahmin by birth and prostitute in later life), who in the preface to her erotic poem, gave a very sketchy account of her life story which follows the route of adultery, social ostracism/desertion and prostitution. Manada Devi's memoir, however, deals with various stages of her life in detail. It consists of chapters clearly denoting the different stages of her life in almost chronological order. As such, the very naming of the chapters indicates the trajectory of her life which is nothing but a series of causative events. Chapter-1 namely 'In Childhood' (*Balye*) offers the account of her birth, parentage, early education etc.. Chapter-2 titled 'In Adolescence' (*Koishore*) depicts various emotional, physical changes in the adolescent girl which she had to cope up with all alone since she did not get regular company of her father anymore after the latter's remarriage. 'Running Away' (*Polayan*), that is Chapter-3, deals with the adolescent girl's elopement with Rameshda, a distant cousin, followed by gradual realisation of her mistake (dealt in the following Chapter aptly named 'Realising My Mistake' or *Bhul Bhangilo*). Chapter-5, 'On the Road to Sin' (*Paap er Pathe*), talks about her distressful condition followed by her desertion by the cousin (Rameshda) and finally her entry into the world's oldest profession elaborately discussed in the next chapter 'Selling My Body' (*Deho Bikroi*). Chapter-7 'The Social Canvas' (*Samaj Chitra*) is significant in the sense that it focuses on the gendered society and its hypocrisy. It also brings to light the contemporary literary scene and its portrayal of 'fallen' women. Chapter-8 'Playing with Fire' (*Agni Krira*), tells us about the impact of various contemporary political movements like Gandhi's non-cooperation in Bengal. It gives us a glimpse about the reformation programmes led by

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan and the ilk. The chapter also brings to the fore the participation of Bengali women in these social and political movements. ‘Vortex of Filth’ (*Pankil Aborte*), Chapter-9, focuses on the distressful condition of women in the domestic sphere due to malicious in-laws. Last three chapters of the memoir zoom in on the life of the aged prostitute who, now remorseful, reflects on the ‘sinful’ life she led and finally decided to donate all her wealth to the cause of the ‘fallen’ women and other lower strata people.

If we concentrate on the very title of the memoir (‘An Educated Woman in Prostitution’), it appears quite oxymoronic particularly at the backdrop of 19th century Bengal since education was not so common for women at that time. The subtitle (‘A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit’) provided by the translator clearly maps the trajectory of Manada Devi’s life. While the word ‘educated’ from the title of the memoir gives the women writer some agency to speak about her life, the word ‘prostitution’ robs her of ‘respectability’. Interestingly, however, Manada Devi proclaims herself as ‘Kumari Srimati Manada Devi’ (in the original Bengali version). The sobriquet ‘Kumari’ both designates unmarried and supposedly virgin while Srimati is a respectable title written before the name of women in India. Thus, Manada Devi defies social categorisation by writing her name as ‘Kumari Srimati Manada Devi’. Furthermore, no woman is ‘born’ a prostitute, rather ‘becomes’ a prostitute as Simon de Beauvoir would say; in Manada Devi’s case, her transformation from an educated woman from a ‘respectable’ household to a prostitute under certain circumstances raises issues like hypocrisy of society towards ‘fallen’ women. In fact, as Sutanuka Ghosh posits, ‘the term ‘becoming’ indicates that the ‘self’ is not a finished or stable product and is continually undergoing a dynamic process of change, even transformation. ‘Becoming’ also suggests the ongoing agency of the subject, even when operating under circumstantial or other constraints.’ (Ghosh 107) The very ‘wounds’ become her ‘power’ when the body becomes a site of contestation between self and society. She vehemently attacks the double-standard of patriarchy and affirms to expose the hypocrites of the society who despite being lustful assumes the mask of gentlemen while the women they enjoy are considered to be doomed. Her singularity lies in the fact that she never concealed her real identity in the memoir, even expresses her desire to publish her photograph along with her memoir. She published it in her life time and appended her counter responses to the criticism of the readers and critics in subsequent edition(s) of the book. It was a radical step for a woman of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal to publicly proclaim her identity as a prostitute and vindicating her rights to live her life on her own terms defying the codes and conventions of the society. No doubt that the memoir got immediate attention after its publication. Regarding the book’s reception, Sandip Bandyopadhyay mentions the copy of the advertisement published on the periodical “Shanti” from Dhaka which says: ‘The book has created a great flutter in Bengali society. It offers you an insight into the root of the social malady and exposes the hypocrisy of the custodians of society — leaders, lawyers, professors — Who all patronise this loathsome profession. The book has run into 3 editions in 3 months.’ (Bandyopadhyay 21)

In the advertisement written for the second edition (attached with the Bengali version), Manada Devi asks for equal rights for women and criticises the double-standard of patriarchal society. She even raises her voice for the representation of prostitutes in the election. If we remember the time when she is writing, this appears to be pretty astonishing and revolutionary too.

First chapter ‘In Childhood’ (*Balye*), as the title suggests, begins with the account of her birth and parentage:

I WAS BORN ON THE 18th of Ashadh in the year 1307 (1900 on the Gregorian calendar). My father was a Brahmin man from a respectable family, and I was his first child. I am unable to disclose his name and family background, for many of his offspring, close relatives and other members of the extended family are alive. Their social standing is not insignificant, and this memoir might come into their possession. I have no desire to disconcert them. (*AEWP* 3)

Manada Devi made it very clear in her life-narrative that she was not neglected by her parents for being a girl child; thanks to the ‘colonial modernity’ and several social reforms of the period. She was

admitted at Bethune School and studied there up to sixth standard. Hers, as she herself claims, was a happy childhood until her mother died. The death of her mother brought one noticeable change in her academic life. She was 'withdrawn' from the school and a tutor was appointed to take care of her education at home. However, she claims, her education was not hampered by this change. The significant change in her early life happened when her father brought home a stepmother only one year older than her and the adolescent girl (Manada Devi) was not given the due attention and care she needed. Manada Devi ruefully recalls her father's indifference and neglect:

I no longer met him [his father] for any reason other than specific requirements. Earlier, he would enquire after my studies, and sit by me to listen to me sing, but not any longer. I did not accompany him and my stepmother when they went to the theatre; I went to the bioscope with Nanda-dada instead. [...] My father took my stepmother on a holiday, accompanied only by a pair of servants. I was eager to go too, but I could not bring myself to tell him this, for it was obvious well beforehand that he had no intention of taking me along. I was deeply hurt. Neither my father nor my stepmother wrote to me from their travels; (*AEWP* 13-16)

The negligence and indifference of the father or any such elderly person was definitely one of the reasons behind the adolescent girl taking the wrong path. We get ample references to the writer's sexual awakening and need for love and guidance: 'I had experienced my sexual awakening. In the absence of a watchful guardian, I realised only too well that an unfriendly wind was blowing in, fanning my proclivities. I even used to be desirous of marriage.' (*AEWP* 21) If the daughters' physical and mental needs were taken care of at the right time, as Manada Devi in her later life ruminates, the damage could be averted: 'Today I feel that suitable guardianship would have done me a world of good;' (*AEWP* 34).

Her first sexual experience made her more bold and fearless: 'I was like a wild tiger who had tasted blood for the first time. There was no fear or repentance—on the contrary, my anxiety and hesitation disappeared. [...] Six or seven months passed, while I kept adding fuel to the fire of nature.' (*AEWP* 30) Manada Devi admits the urgency of her 'desires' which led her to leave the house with her distant cousin Ramesh: 'It was because I was deluded by desire and had taken leave of my senses.' (*AEWP* 33) However, she was later deserted by the cousin and being all alone (since her father was not ready to reclaim her), she ultimately chose the world's oldest profession. As such, Manada Devi was victim to the 'the elopement -desertion syndrome' (Bandyopadhyay 723) which Aparna Bandyopadhyay argues, 'was a significant factor to prostitution even in the early decades of the twentieth century' (Bandyopadhyay 723). Bandyopadhyay, in her article, refers Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the then Deputy Magistrate of Murshidabad and the novelist, who found, 'seduction by unprincipled villains who seduced women from their households, often leaving them to their fate, after their novelty wore off' was one of the principal factors that led women to embrace prostitution (Chattopadhyay in Bandyopadhyay 724). The inequality inherent in gender relations comes to the fore because the male figure, the seducer, remains unnoticed and gets scot-free.

While the memoir reflects on personal experiences and encounters, it also brings to the fore the picture of contemporary society. In fact, personal narrative and historical narrative move parallel. They crisscross and form the unique texture of the memoir. In various stages of her life, Manada Devi has experienced the hypocrisy and double standard of patriarchy. The double-standard of the father-figure comes to the fore when he discards the proposal of her daughter's marriage on the grounds of her age when he himself married a woman almost of the same age as his daughter. While deserted by Ramesh and forsaken by family, she vents out her feelings of being wronged as a woman in society to the 'mahant':

I am a grave sinner, babaji, society has no place for me, my father has forsaken me. But you know of the men who have sold their honour and prestige, their wealth and assets, their bodies and their souls, at the feet of women like me, look, society has given them the choicest of positions. They are extolled as poets and writers, renowned as politicians and patriots, respected as the rich and the noble. There are

even some sages and priests who have become gurus to the populace, about whom society maintains a studied silence. [...] This is how your society metes out justice. (*AEWP* 54)

The question of injustice surfaces again and again in her criticism of patriarchal society:

A woman, when she becomes fallen, seems to have lost all her value. Even if one insults her, one cannot be held on charges of defamation by law. But the same law allows (defamation charges) in the case of a 'fallen' man. Why? Because the law has been framed by men.... Why don't those in the Congress council who demand equal rights for men and women press for a solution (to this) at the legislative council? ... In the event of none putting up this demand at the coming council session, we would be forced to conclude that all those who clamour for equal rights are sheer liars. Either fulfil our demand or expel the fallen men from the council and such other bodies." (*AEWP* 140)

Rani Mashi's commentary on society also indicates the 'fallen' nature of society: 'It is not just we women who have fallen—all of society has gone the same way.' (*AEWP* 69) The case of Aparajita Devi, as mentioned by Manada Devi in the memoir, is an instance where the wife is asked by the husband's aunt to 'sale' her 'chastity' to earn for the family and upon denial was led to torture and death. She was the third person in the family to face such fate because she was the third wife of her husband and the previous two wives met the same fate. By mentioning such incidents of society, the memoir brings into light the 'fallen' nature of society: 'Are the custodians of the society aware that such tragic things are now taking place in almost every family? Society is going astray. The miscreants who can buy prestige for money go about scot free.' (*AEWP* 110)

Manada Devi's memoir makes an important observation on the contemporary literary scene also. She comments on the gradual changes in the portrayal of prostitutes in the contemporary literature:

An epochal change was coming over literature at the time, which I will discuss briefly because of its close relationship with the lives of prostituted women. The image that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his contemporaries drew of the adulteress reinforced nothing but hatred. [...] But after this, Rabindranath Tagore revealed a different aspect of the character of the adulteress, which makes us sympathetic. And what he kept unclear was revealed openly by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Naresh Chandra Sengupta, and other young writers, ensuring that people could still be attracted to such women. They said, 'Prostituted women may not be pure, but they are not devoid of human ideals. Considering that the fallen woman can be simple at heart, spiritual, god fearing, compassionate and generous, why does she have to an object of scorn? The fault lies with society, not with the woman.' (*AEWP* 81-82)

This attitude of questioning the 'fault' of society makes Manada Devi a radical feminist figure, who, through her life story, highlights the multiple marginalisation of women in postcolonial patriarchal societal structure. The acceptability of Manada Devi and other 'fallen' women and the 'respectable' woman figures like Basanti Devi ('Deshbandhu' Chittaranjan Das' wife), Urmila Devi, Suniti Devi and the ilk were not the same in the society even when they participated in and contributed to the same social and political cause of the society.

The memoir contains a series of interesting reflections on Bengali society of the times. A significant part of the book is devoted to the description of the prostitutes' participation in social activities like the non-cooperation movement in the early twentieth century. The author fondly remembers, 'The enthusiasm over noncooperation was such that while working together (with educated youths) we could hardly feel that we were despicable prostitutes and they young men of the educated gentry. Those young workers also did not mind working along with fallen women (barbanitas).' (*AEWP* 89) Their entry into public work was marked by raising funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims in 1919 which they later donated to the respected Chittaranjan Das. This kind of community work gave them a sense of self-respect and prepared them for newer and bigger enterprise:

We, some of the patita women, formed a small group. Our customers would help us with suggestions and encouragement. Formerly, while collecting funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims, we had chanced to mix with the bhadralok people. This had added to our courage, smartness and ability. We

had got acquainted with many leaders of the country. This time, when we again joined public work, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan's associates were very happy and they would help us in many ways. (*AEWP* 88-89)

However, this picture of social acceptance does not reflect the true picture of contemporary society. Manada Devi shows us both sides of the coin— acceptance and non-acceptance of prostitutes by the society. While people like Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das welcomed people across class and caste and gender (including prostitutes) in the Swadeshi movement, Brahma Samaj, the so-called enlightened religion, was not ready to accept prostitutes as their members: 'And look at the state of the Brahma Samaj now. The other day we went there to join them voluntarily, but they did not accept us. Someone named Heramba-babu (later I learnt his name was Herambachandra Maitra) dismissed us as bad women and did not even allow us to touch his feet in respect.' (*AEWP* 71)

We come across Gandhiji's 'intolerance' towards the prostitutes when he purportedly kept prostitutes and criminal in the same bracket: 'During Mahatma Gandhi's tour of Bengal, he was invited to a gathering by the association of women in prostitution in Barishal. But he did not attend it, saying that if such women were to form associations, so would criminals.' (*AEWP* 100-101) Thus, Manada Devi's narrative challenges the reformist discourse on women's upliftment in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal and brings to the fore the heterogeneity in women's condition in any society.

Throughout the ages, it has always been tough for the women to establish their individual identities; and indeed tougher for a 'fallen' woman to vindicate her own rights to live her life according to her choice. Despite different trials and tribulations in life, Manada Devi succeeds to express an assertive femininity and her journey to female empowerment eventually carves a niche of her own identity. She questions the sexual double standard in society and calls for gender equality. She argues that if there are 'fallen woman', there must be 'fallen man' too but unlike women, they don't have to bear any social disgrace.

In fine, Manada Devi's memoir is one of a kind in the history of life-narratives written by 'an educated woman in prostitution' in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. It becomes a testament of the collective condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal highlighting the patriarchal double-standard and the hypocritical liberalism that affected the condition of women across class and caste in colonial Bengal. It brings light on the lives of prostitutes in contemporary society— their participation in contemporary Swadeshi movement, non-acceptance of the prostitutes by so called reformers etc.. Of course, in the usual sense of the term, we cannot term Manada Devi's memoir as a feminist manifesto since there are many ambivalences and/ or limitations in Manada Devi's outlook. For example, she argues for child marriage: 'Since nature has decreed that women feel desire at the age of fourteen, it is best for them to be married before that.' (*AEWP* 136) She is apprehensive of the 'free-mingling' of girls and boys in schools and is critical of theatres and fiction/ romances because, she believes, they fuel the sensual 'desires' and bring downfall. Needless to say, she develops this kind of apprehension and opinion out of her own personal experiences. Finally, despite certain limitations, the book shows serious concerns for the women's cause and empowerment. It showcases how body becomes an empowered site too. It also foregrounds how the 'personal' becomes 'political' underlining the connections between personal experience(s) and larger social and political structures. Thus, the memoir is a landmark in the history of life-narratives by an early 20<sup>th</sup> century woman who stood tall for constructing a distinct female subjectivity and for her honest utterances of the 'wrongs' she suffered and the 'rights' she exercised throughout her life to carve a niche for herself.

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