



## NOT [HIS]TORY BUT HER STORY: WRITING LIFE, HOME, HOUSE, AND RELIGION IN RASSUNDARI DEVI'S *AMAR JIBAN (MY LIFE)*

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### Abstract

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)* is not only an autobiography but also a sociography. It is not only the authentic account of the self of a woman but also the collective account of the history of women of the then era. The book is a literary heirloom, a gynocentric bildungsroman, archiving the social and political history from the microcosm of the domestic sphere through the ordinary, private experiences of an uneducated woman educated by life itself. Rassundari's bent towards lived religion which is instrumental for her literacy, her transition from a timid girl to wife and from wife to mother, and from mother to a writer gives us a panoramic picture of the then Bengali and Hindu mores. As a "female flaneur", Rassundari takes us on a tour not only to "the life of an old Hindu woman" but also "to all Hindu women of her time". Within the confined space of her household, Rassundari makes a room of her own and the cocooned space becomes the site of engendering an emancipatory discourse that becomes the basis of history. The paper seeks to study how through her ordinary life experiences vis-à-vis the social and political Rassundari has created history and claims a distinct place in it.

**Keywords:** gynocentric bildungsroman, life, home, house, religion, history.

### Introduction

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century India when the horse of British colonialism was taking India over; when the Bengal Renaissance was yet to set in; when undivided Bengal was enslaved to the dark forces of religious and social bigotry and superstition; when a handful of men tested the Western education; when women were socially caged in, socially predestined to remain confined in the domestic sphere and were forbidden to get educated, a few self-educated Bengali women dared to come out of the cage (Das 2019). Prominent among them were Rassundari Devi (1810-1899?) who is famous for her autobiography, the first of its kind in Bengali literature by a woman; Jnanadanandini Devi (1850-

1941), and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) who is famous for *Sultana's Dream* (1908).

Rassundari pioneered the genre of autobiography and was a wonder-woman as she did not have any formal education at all. Apart from Rassundari's autobiography, there are a handful of autobiographies by Bengali women that came out much later, for example, Pratibha Basu's *Jiboner Jalchabi* and Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamayer Katha* (2008). But these writings were heavily influenced by the western tradition of autobiography. What makes Rassundari's writing unique is its rusticity and the fact that she has no other influence on her writing than her life which is delivered in a lucid, candid, and unpretentious

manner from the point of view of an unschooled woman. Her feminism is not merely a reverberation of the wave of western feminism. Rather, it is rooted in the society and culture of her own, and springs from the existing gender inequalities of the then society and the sorry state of the female reality. Though Rassundari was completely unaware of the discourse of western feminism, she can safely be called a feminist in the western meaning of the word. Through her self-narrative, Rassundari implicitly and sometimes explicitly challenges patriarchal stereotypes, and ruptures the existing social status quo.

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)* is not only the authentic account of the self of a woman but the collective account of the history of women of the then era. The book is a literary heirloom, a gynocentric bildungsroman, archiving the social and political history from the microcosm of the domestic sphere through the ordinary private experiences of an illiterate woman educated by life itself. The paper seeks to study how through her ordinary life experiences vis-à-vis the social and political Rassundari has created history and claims a distinct place in it.

There are two "khanda" (sections) in *Amar Jiban*. Published in 1876, the first section comprises sixteen "rachana" (compositions). In 1906 came out the second section in which there are fifteen "rachana" (compositions). In the manner of an epic, Rassundari begins her life writing with an invocation to the Hindu deity goddess Saraswati, who embodies knowledge and learning. Goddess Saraswati is invoked to aid and enlighten Rassundari in her self-written enterprise.

Each composition is prepped with Rassundari's humble prayer and sincere regards to God for His kindness, for His glory, and His "pied" creation. The first composition is hemmed with the sweet, tender, and gleeful memories of childhood. Rassundari says that she was born in March 1810 and she was 88 when she started writing her life. She was born in Potajia. At the age of twelve, she got married. She had nine sons and two daughters. Rassundari has made it clear that her writing is a distillation of her life. It is not that her "omission of

facts from her life is due to the totality or that the complexity of life constantly eludes her" or that the then "discourse pressures her into ordering these facts" (Renza 3). In the case of Rassundari, she gives an account of those events she remembers.

Generally, in autobiographical writing, there appears a fissure between the private and the public but in the case of Rassundari, the two overlap as her private space becomes public through the act of writing her life. Hence, "the project of writing about oneself to oneself is always at the beginning, is always propaedeutic in structure, and therefore prone to an obsessive concern with method as well as a "stuttering," fragmented narrative appearance" (Renza 10).

### **Writing Life and Society**

Rassundari presents herself as a gentle, gullible, introverted, weepy girl who cried for almost everything and was tortured and exploited by her peers. Her mother consoled her by saying that their village is the haunting place of "cheledhora" (Child Lifter) who kidnaps all naughty children. One day, Rassundari was gulled and physically harassed by one of her friends. Since then, it was decided that she would not be allowed to go out. She belonged to the family of zamindars. They had a school within the precinct of their house. Her uncle put her there. Though she was in a school, Rassundari being a girl was not allowed to learn and she was conditioned to believe so. While the boys read aloud their lessons, Rassundari at the age of eight imbibed those lessons unobserved.

It seems that Rassundari has tried to maintain a safe distance from male members of her family which indicates her dismissal of patriarchy. From her childhood, she was father-less as her father died when she was at her early age. The control of the Father has not impacted her psyche. Rassundari "grew up thinking of herself as her mother's child. In her autobiography, she describes how upsetting it was for her to be introduced as her father's daughter" (Tharu et al. 190). Moreover, in her autobiography, she hardly speaks of her husband, as if, he is irrelevant to her. We find mention of his death after which "her head was shaved in keeping with the humiliating customs of the times, which, for

Rassundari, were more painful than death" (Tharu et al. 191).

While scripting her life, Rassundari gives us the sociopolitical picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. She has presented herself as an "individual," as a "self" and a "person". Grace Gredys Harris has defined "individual as member of the human kind, self as locus of experience, and person as agent-in-society" (599). Rassundari is an "individual" in the sense that in her self portrait she is a representative of womankind; a "self" in the sense she is the source of the life experiences; a "person" in the sense that she is the harbinger of societal change.

In the Fifth composition, we find a glaring picture of gender discrimination in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hindu society. Rassundari was not allowed to leave her Father-in-law's house to see her ailing mother who was very close to her and whose last wish was to see her dear daughter. She is sure that things would have been different had she been born a boy:

Birds and beasts are inferior beings. And to think of the sin I have committed even after being fortunate enough to be born a human. 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. (Tharu et al. 199)

The use of avian imagery refers to the unnatural societal discrimination and at the same time hints at the possibility of freedom. Rassundari was outraged by the fact that she was treated like an animal and was denied the basic human right. She fumes: "What is the use of being born as a human being if one is not treated as one? It is my misfortune. It is a matter of no ordinary regret. Alas my God, why did you let me be born as a human being? It is indeed a very rare fortune to be born a human being" (Tharu et al 199).

Rassundari was a "mohila" (woman) not a "bhadramahila" (gentlewoman/lady). She qualified in one criterion of becoming a gentlewoman but

failed or, to be more particular, was failed miserably in the other one as she did not have any formal education. A "bhadramahila" was defined as one who was from a "bhadra" (educated and cultured), well-to-do background, and one who had a western education and who was morally upright. Partha Chaterjee in his essay "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: the Contest in India" points out the expected criteria from a "bhadramahila": "Formal education became not only acceptable, but, in fact, a requirement for the new "bhadramahila" [respectable woman], when it was demonstrated that it was possible for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home, that is, without becoming a "mehsabi" (628). So, it is clear that even "bhadramahilas" were not free from patriarchal disciplinarianism.

The marginalised status of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century women in Bengal is well articulated by Sumanta Banerjee:

Females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adapted to men. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to the comfort and happiness of her husband, to look after and tend her children, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies... (qtd. in Chakraborty 134).

Women became the most loyal bearer of the baton of patriarchy. Partha Chaterjee quotes a statement of Radharani Lahiri in favour of women as household "angels": Of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important . . . whatever knowledge she may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework (qtd. in Chaterjee 629). To give another example, Chaterjee has cited Kundamala Debi who opines:

If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to mehsabi-like behaviour. That is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a

place the world would be". (qtd. in Chaterjee 629)

Though aristocratic women started getting educated in missionary schools, the traditional idea of gender and the concept of women's position in the home and outside the home continued to dominate the education of women. Women cannot be imagined beyond motherhood, wifehood, serving men, caring for them, washing their clothes. The purpose of education was to school and police women, to be more and more subservient, and more loyal: "Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtue – the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social forms of "disciplining" – of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility...." (Chaterjee 629).

Rassundari's post-married life became extremely unbearable, and to overcome it she tried hard to read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*: "One day I dreamt that I was reading the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. When I woke up I felt enthralled" (200). She tested its reading in the dream and felt zealous but very soon her zeal was lost as she forgot the letters she heard in childhood and she was afraid of social criticism. She became desperate to learn:

I decided to steal one of the palm leaves on which my eldest son used to practice his handwriting. One look at the leaf, another at the sheet, a comparison with the letters I already knew, and, finally, a verification with the speech of others--that was the process adopted for some time. Furtively I would take out the sheet and put it back promptly before anybody could see it. (201)

She had to go through another trouble i.e. decrypting the handwritten books as books at that time were not published but written manually. After much effort, she managed to read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. Rassundari has taken a dig at self-proclaimed guardians of the then society, revealing the stark gender inequity: "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" (201). It is indeed quite ironic that a female

god was worshipped as an embodiment of knowledge, learning, and wisdom but women were not allowed to acquire the same.

### **Writing Home and House**

Due to her diffidence and fear, most of the time Rassundari was kept indoors. The ways of the world outside her home was too unfriendly and unwelcoming for her. After marriage, she came out of her cozy and comfortable space into the opposite one. We find an explicit wall between the two social spaces – "ghar" and "bahir", "the home and the world" (Chaterjee 624). The "ghar" is predominated by women and the "bahir" by the men. Rassundari felt more protected, sheltered, and strengthened in the former space. Partha Chaterjee has made an apt observation on the import of the two social spaces:

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world--and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir". (624)

After her marriage, Rassundari was, as if, exiled from her "ghar". Within the walls of her father-in-law's house, she felt throttled. It was home as long as her mother-in-law was active. But it turned into a house the moment all the domestic responsibilities shifted to Rassundari which proved to be a heavy burden for her. Rassundari has expressed her extreme hopelessness in these lines – "People put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this cage for life. I would never be freed" (*Amar Jiban* 194). After the birth of her children especially, life became unbearable for her. But she has not aggravated her condition through her narration. Rather, she has mellowed it through her acceptance. This mellowed

presentation of her domestic wretchedness is misinterpreted

as a celebration of the patient and long-suffering Bengali housewife....What is surprising, indeed astonishing, are the impatience and discontent, however mellow and understated, that come through as clear protests against the trapped lives of Bengali women and as laments over their helplessness. (Tharu et al. 191)

Though the house she lives in is an “unstably and contingently gendered domain” through her writing it becomes for her “the liminal space between public and private” (Burton 6). The “ghar” and the “bahir” get merged in her writing through which she turns things inside out.

#### Writing Religion

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal two important branches of Hindu religion – Sakta and Vaishnava were prevalent but these two ceased to be religions in the true sense of the term and were reduced to mere rituals. The study of Tantric and Vaishnava philosophy replaced Upanishad and Vedanta which embody the essence of Hinduism (Gupta 1). In 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, we find the growth of Christianity augmented by the Baptist Missionaries and the priests of the Church of England, the growth of Brahma Samaj, and the consequent reformations within the Hindu religion. Though Rassundari reads *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, her God is not a Vaishnava one. Her God is Dayamadhab, the One referred to by her mother in her childhood. Rassundari’s God whom she invokes at every turn of her life is not confined to any religious identity. He is very kind; He is her saviour; He helps her teach reading; He helps her get over her domestic drudgery; He is the only solace and only sanctuary in her caged condition. Rassundari’s is an a-religious God. She has freed God from religion and all sorts of ritual, dogmatism, discrimination, intolerance, and most importantly from Brahminism and “religious nationalism”.

In her childhood, Rassundari was a shy and gutless girl. To hold off her fear, her mother suggested her to call to mind the family God,

“Dayamadhab” whenever she is afraid or in danger. Throughout her life, Rassundari has done so though initially she confused Him with a person called Dayamadhab. The confused child asked her mother a few things about Dayamadhab. Jyotirindranath Thakur in his “Bhumika” (Introduction) to *Amar Jiban* refers to a conversation between child Rassundari and her mother on the family God, “Dayamadhab”. The original conversation is in Bengali. I have translated it thus:

“I then asked my mother, mother! How did Dayamadhab hear our cries while staying in the yard? Mother said, “He is the Supreme God. He is everywhere, That’s why He can hear. He listens to everyone. He is the Almighty who created us all. He hears wherever he is called. He listens even when he is called out loud, he listens even when he is called in mind. That is why, he is not a man, but the God”. Then I said, “ But mother! Every body calls him Parameswar, the Supreme God. Is He ours? The mother replied, “He is the Supreme God of all. All take refuge in Him. He is the Origin of beings. He is the Archetype, the Quintessence. He created all things in this world, He loves all, He is the God of all”. (Thakur n.p.)

The lesson of religion given by Rassundari’s mother and the one Rassundari has practised throughout her life is “modern” in the Arnoldian sense. There is an absence of extravagant rituals. Hers is living spirituality and living religion. In the mundane day-to-day events of everyday life, she sees and feels the presence of God, realizes the mercy of God, and relies heavily on Him. Rassundari has de-ritualised the Hindu religious practice and pioneered the reforms within Hinduism that were in the offing.

#### Conclusion

Though Rassundari’s identity is interpellated and interpolated by the then societal norms, she holds her head high and kindles the dream of millions to come out of their caged condition: “A persistent, almost 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" (Tharu et al. 190). She is, as if, a "female flaneur" who roams backward and forward in time in the different phases of her life. Rassundari takes us on a tour not only to "the life of an old Hindu woman" but also "to all Hindu women of her time" and at the same time gives us a panoramic picture of the then Bengali and Hindu mores. The autobiography thus becomes a sociography, a kaleidoscope infused with female consciousness by which the traditional representation of a Bengali housewife is deconstructed and reconstructed. Within the confined space of her household, Rassundari makes a room of her own and the very cocooned space becomes the site of engendering an emancipatory discourse that becomes the basis of the beginning of a new history.

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