



A Sketch of Life: A Reading of Rasasundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*

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Abstract

In the history of every women's writing, there is a tale of struggle, sacrifice and self-discovery. Writing about one's life seems to be interesting but it becomes so astonishing when a nineteenth century woman in India had experimented it. Life writing has recently attained the attention of scholars from various disciplines and it has gone out various changes. Life writing is a narrative account of one's life and it is a self-conscious autobiographical writing. This paper tries to read a few chapters from Rasasundari Devi's Autobiography Amar Jiban (My Life). It is so curious to know about the life of an uneducated woman, who wrote an autobiography in Bengali and got her work published. The paper discusses the socio political situation existed in Pre Independent India and how Rasasundari Devi had overcome all those challenges to achieve her dream. Her voice is the voice of a subdued female. The process of writing her life made her to realize her self. The book is a reflection of all taboos that hinder the growth and self-development of women. Amar Jiban is a singular literary effort by a woman to bring her identity in the public sphere. Unlike other famous autobiographies by men, Rasasundari Devi's is entirely different as it portrays her original sketch of life and she is a representative of the whole community of subdued women. This paper analyses her work from a feminist lens.

Keywords: Life writing, Private life, Self-narration, Women education.

Introduction

'Life writing', a term that is broader than the concepts of Autobiography or biography. It covers a broad area including personal narratives, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, wills, anecdotes, dispositions and diaries. If someone tells a life story means that the life is worth telling as well as they establish a kind of identity. Moreover life writing offers freedom even though it is definitely private and interior. Life writing is based on one's experience in his own life that was shared by others. Julia Novak, in her Experiments in Life Writing says,

Life Writing stands for a range of writings about lives or parts of lives which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, despositions and court proceedings...marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific writings and



digital forms. (1)

The term 'Life writing' is originated from biography which is in Greek means "bios" means life and "graphia" means writing. It is Virginia Woolf who first used the term Life writing in her memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). It has been a favourite topics for feminists or Gynocritics as their concentration on the lives of women who write about their self. Life writing is a form of non-traditional literature. It provides the reading of previously neglected texts of women as they are considered as non-canonical. And even women's autobiographies were considered as low cultured personal narratives and excluded from the literary canon. Life writing gives an opportunity for women to define herself. Apart from other forms of literary texts that make a notion that the author is absent from the text here the narrative becomes the most original genre. These narratives are written in the perspectives of a first person viewpoint.

Amar Jiban - A Life Sketch

Unlike autobiography, the literary history of life writing wasn't seen as a womanless history. so there is a need to re-read the autobiography of a nineteenth century woman writer like Rasasundari Devi. Though she was born into an aristocratic family, she was denied of education. From a very early young age, she cherished the desire to read, write and learn. She lost her father in the childhood and she was brought under her mother's care. She was married to a landlord at the age of fourteen and the rest of her life was spent in her husband's household. She had all the responsibilities of a wife, daughter in law and a mother. She was busy with her domestic duties and responsibilities. She started to write something when she was 88 years old and it is astonishingly a wonderful achievement. She writes about her childhood, accounts of her personal life. It can be considered as a woman's struggle to articulate a female voice.

Most of her compositions begin with an invocation to God, the Almighty and throughout her autobiography she continues her strong faith in God. She thinks that God is always with her and everything in her life is predetermined by him. Rasasundari Devi lost her father when she was a four years old and she was grown up as a mother's daughter thinking that her mother was unmarried. She was very much attached to her mother and all her beliefs and thoughts were moulded by her mother's ideologies. People used to call her as a golden doll.

The society that she portrays in these life narratives is of a woman in the nineteenth century. She is an aristocratic Hindu woman and yet she was denied of education and freedom. She was grown up as timid and fearful. She was abused by other boys in her locality and sometimes beaten by them. She did not resist them but only but she prayed to the God and thought that he would punish them. She was also afraid of kidnappers in her village. Like her mother she always seems to be patient and forgiving. In fact her mother taught her the ways of God. Unlike other boys or her brother she was not allowed to attend schools. They had a teacher in their locality to teach the boys and she eagerly wished to attend classes but that remained unfulfilled and later the school was burnt in a fire.

Her childhood was carefree and happy because she had got a very wonderful mother



in the world. The day of her wedding was the most painful day in her life. She was only fourteen then. For the first time, she realized the pangs of separation. She had to leave her home. She wonders why she has to leave her own home and there is the most heart touching and emotional scene in her autobiography; “Don’t give me away mother”. This moved everybody into tears. My mother picked me up and tried to explain, “You are good girl. You understand everything. God is with us, so don’t cry. These scenes are taken from her memories. It is remarkable that she can remember things that happened many years before. She was handed over to her husband’s family and she did not even know that where she was going to. After many days travel, she reaches her husband’s home and she was utterly broken and often missed her beloved mother. But time has soothed all her pain and her mother in law became her good friend. She was so lucky to get motherly affection at her husband’s house. But she was not allowed to talk with other people as she was the new bride. She had to cover her face and look down at her feet only.

Rasasundari’s mother in law had lost her eye sight and soon all her happiness had gone out. She was assigned all the household chores and responsibilities. She had also children to look after and also serve guests and servants. The entire responsibility was fell upon her in the early youth. She had no other choice except fulfilling her duties and becoming a good daughter in law, wife and mother. She was the apple of the eye in her own home but she began to feel like a slave. She had nothing to do and think about. She often wishes to go back to her mother but she was rarely sent to her home for some family festivals and asked to come back within a couple of days. She prays:

Blessed is your mercy. Blessed are your laws,

Blessed is your Maya, which covers the entire world. (Amar Jiban 1999)

There are many widowed women in her family house and Rasasundari Devi in her childhood thought that they were unmarried. Their condition was so pathetic so they had to end up within the four walls. Her mother gave her a lot of courage to overcome all the obstacles in her life. Girls were not allowed to go out alone or attend schools. She had to only please the people around her with her responsibilities. She had always wished to read and write especially the Holy Scriptures like Chatatinya Bagavatha, which had cast a spell on her when she was a child. Her brother used to read Chaitanya Bagavatha and she was uneducated and not allowed to even look into it only because she was a girl.

Rasasundari Devi, though she was born into an aristocratic family had no freedom to mingle with the outside world and she could not even visit her mother in her death bed. She was so sad that she was that much attached to her mother and she was useless to her mother. She says if I were a son, I would have flown directly to my mother besides I am helpless, I am a caged bird. She had to serve others needs and there was none to understand what she actually needed. She worked day and night in order to maintain her family and sometimes she did not eat well and careless about her health. She praises the value of motherhood and felt happy that she had been given a good health to take care of her family yet there was something missing in her mind, the utmost urge to read Chaitanya Bagavatha. It was not only her singular experience but also the fate of women in the particular age in which she



lived. The condition of women was no better than animals. She tells the fears and failures in her life, she is never reluctant to shed her actual emotions and responses. The paper wants to analyse her personal narratives in order to understand the way she deviates from the popular notions of self/other public /private and reading/writing. These accounts give her a space for recording her secrets of intimate life. While writing about one's life, it is a way of disclosing one's identity. Perhaps these experiences are not born out of fancy or imagination as they are the true products from her real life.

Once she had a dream of reading the Chaithanya Bagavatha and she thanked God when she woke up for giving her an opportunity to read the book at least in a dream. That dream came true when her husband left the book one day to be read by her son Bipin and she managed to get one sheet of paper from it and hid it in the kitchen. She was so sad because she could not read it without the help of someone. Rasasundari had to do all the household chores and most of the time she was busy with them so she also did not get time to even look into the page. She was also afraid of being caught. Later she managed to get one of the palm leave that her son used to practice alphabets and tried to work it out. Printed books were not easily available in that time. Years had gone, her physical and mental states were changed. She became strong and brave. She went to primary schools and sat with small children to practice reading. She started to speak with some of her maid servants. She had three daughter in laws and she used to have discussion with them about many things common among them. Her daughter in laws were amused by her ability to read these Holy Scriptures and she used to sing it for them. Fear is our great enemy to pursue our dreams and she had overcome it and finally achieved her dream. She seems to be very religious almost dedicated her life to the God. She believes in God's power. She blames on men who simply eat drink and waste their time and she says that all lives will be reduced to dust. Rasasundari had written a few accounts from the sixty years of her life and she believes that the rest of her life will be written by someone else. She feels also happy that today parents take initiative to educate their daughters. *Amar Jiban* is not about her personal accomplishments but true accounts of her own life. The self that creates here is extremely religious. It creates a bold statement that a tremendous power in a woman. A woman who is not associated to a form of sequential religious significance cannot claim any astounding powers.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the book is about of her life, overwork loads, responsibilities of motherhood and even the sufferings of widowhood. The main focus of this book is about the need for women education. Her tone is what Virginia Woolf could describe as "special pleading" characteristic of much of women's writing. (Sarkar, Tania 223) Rasasundari Devi has woven an extremely inspiring life story with a strong woman personality.

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