



**Writing History, Writing Life: Re-scripting Nation through Rassundari's Words in the Autobiography *Amar Jiban***

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Abstract:

The act of history writing has been predominantly a male prerogative for a long time. In fact, the official history is still very much preoccupied with the male narrative which has been collectively written to remove the women from history. By taking Rassundari's autobiography *Amar Jiban* as a text for analysis, the paper intends to present a counter historical narrative, which is set against the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional hegemonic narratives of the Hindu nationalists, where women folks were reduced into the repositories of the prestige of the nation. With the deployment of Annette Kolodny's concept of "herstory", the paper examines the potentiality of a female narrative in re-writing the history debunking the male centric discourse called "history".

**Keywords:** Herstory, spiritual domain, material domain, empty homogenous time, heterotopia and nation.

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Nineteenth century political sphere of Bengal is interesting because it is located not only in the public sphere of the province but also within the private and domestic spheres of the Bengali households. Some of the apparently domestic issues like sati, kulin marriage, raise of the age of consent, widow remarriage had dominantly shaped the political discourse of the time. The native politics of the period was chiefly divided into two distinctive strands over two different readings of Hindu domestic practices: one consisting of some western educated liberal reformers agitating against the regressive Hindu customs and the other comprising a large group of Hindu nationalists who “celebrated them as an excess reserved over and above colonisation, any change in which would signify the surrender of the last bastion of freedom” (Sarkar, *The Hindu Wife* 223). This group of Hindu nationalists were rigid in their belief that “nationalism could situate its emancipatory project only by enclosing a space that was still taken to be inviolate, autonomous” (223) and they identified this space with the domestic space of Hindu households. Since the women were the chief inhabitants of this “inner” space called “andarmahal”, their lives were co-opted into the ideologies of nationalism. In their dominant, nationalistic, hegemonic narrative, the body of the woman and the body of the nation become synonymous. The political map of the time, if observed minutely, can be found to be marked by the absence of Hindu upper caste and land owning middle class. Colonial rule have deprived them of their control over the political, military and administrative affairs of the country. Therefore, this significant lack of the autonomous sphere within civil society instigated them to wield their control over the “the sphere of human relations within the Hindu home, the Hindu joint family, Hindu conjugal norms” (Sarkar, *Words* 29). In *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*, Tanika Sarkar significantly notes:

They would require an assertion of full authority over the lives of its women. Women were also the signifiers of the autonomy of Hindu laws and their discipline, whereas colonial rule had allegedly compromised the man through its education and culture. The woman, as ruled entirely by Hindu scripture and Hindu custom,



was perceived as the site of a past freedom as well as of an emergent nationhood (Sarkar 29).

The nineteenth century nationalist discourse separated the domain of culture into two spheres – the spiritual and the material. While the material sphere was successfully captured by Western civilization, the spiritual sphere, the nationalists believed, remained unaffected by the profane activities of the material world. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, took this spiritual/material dichotomy to another dimension of home and world:

The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms *world* and *home* corresponded, had acquired, as noted before, a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But, the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture . . . in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum (Chatterjee 121).

In the imagination of the nationalists, the domination over the household affairs was equalled to the political and administrative capability. Therefore, in order to understand the political scenario of the time one needs to keep a vigilant eye on the “inner” space of middle-class home.

The official history of the nineteenth century Bengal is exclusively dominated by the hegemonic Hindu male narrative, where women were given a mere “contributive”<sup>i</sup> role. Nowhere in the official history do we find a woman’s voice. They were stereotypically represented as the “angel of the house” or “grihalaxmi” symbolizing the sanctity of the nation in the anti-colonial male discourse. Therefore, in order to read history against the grain, it is essential to know the women’s version of it, to discover the scope of “herstory” in every imagined history. Kolodny believes that in every narrative of history, there is a tinge of fictionality. Therefore, there is a need to narrate history from the perspective of women. Kolodny treats “herstory” as a strategic writing back to the age long distortions meted out to the woman’s story by most male writers. Even the most celebrated and intellectual literary figure of the time, Bankimchandra was a perpetrator of the same ideology. In an early 1870 essay<sup>ii</sup>, he compared the virtues and faults of women of the previous generation with those of women of contemporary times. The essay



actually ended up being a criticism of both the traditional and modern women. As a representative figure of the strand of nationalist thinking, Bankim, in his full capacity, also tried to appropriate the discordant, critical and marginal voices of women in his writings. Women had no share in the discourse of anti-colonial nationalism which was chiefly a male discourse trying to create “a national leadership in the image of ideal masculinity – strong, proud, just, wise, a protector of the righteous, and a terror to the mischievous” (Chatterjee 136). Therefore, in order to get a wholistic view of the history of the nineteenth century Bengal, it is essential to read women’s accounts of the time. Women’s writing, therefore, became a political act of winning history for themselves. Rassundari’s *Amar Jiban*, thus, can be read as a reaction to male account of history of the nineteenth century Bengal.

The essential and the unique nature of women’s autobiographies contributed significantly to the rewriting of history. Partha Chatterjee’s observation in this regard seems worth mentioning: “In case of women’s autobiographies . . . the most striking feature is the way in which the very theme of disclosure of self remains suppressed under a narrative of changing times, changing manners, and customs, and changing values (Chatterjee 138). The nineteenth century women’s autobiographies were found to be upholding a particular literary genre which was very different from the idea of carit<sup>iii</sup>. The women’s writings were distinguished as “smritikatha”: “memoirs”, or more accurately, “stories from memory”. Chatterjee noticed, ‘what held these stories together into a single narrative was not the life history of the narrator or the development of her “self” rather the social history of the narrator or the development of her “self” but rather the social history of the “times” (Chatterjee 139). Another important characteristic common to all women’s autobiographies of the time was that they were not “the telling of an exemplary life, not even a life of any importance” (Chatterjee 139). By virtue of their being tales of ordinary lives, they could represent the time more truthfully and by representing the time, they could make themselves a part of the nationalist discourse from which they have been relegated to the periphery. In analysing the importance of the genre, Chatterjee notes:

The genre required the writer only to tell readers, mainly women from a younger generation, how the everyday lives of women had changed. This allowed the questions to be raised: How are we to cope with this change? In what ways must we change ourselves? These were, of course, the central questions of nationalist discourse” (Chatterjee 140).

To discover the answers to the previously asked questions, it is important to read the texts between the lines. `



Rassundari's *Amar Jiban* is the first woman's autobiography written in Bengali language, and most probably, the first full scale autobiography in the Bengali language too. A housewife from an upper class landed family in East Bengal (now in Bangladesh), Rassundari led an uneventful and unremarkable life. She was born around 1809 and was married off to a prosperous family when she was twelve. She had to look after the entire household at the tender age of fourteen and gave birth to twelve children in quick succession. Rassundari braved a significant departure in her life at the age of twenty five by teaching herself to read. Later she also taught herself to write. Rassundari finished the first version of her autobiography in 1868, the very next year of her being widow. She took a long gap to come up with the second part of the autobiography in 1897. So, the publication details substantiate *Amar Jiban* to get qualified as "smritikatha." Although Rassundari showed no overt interest in the political undercurrents of the time, the insertion of the large historical process into her life was inevitable. Tanika Sarkar, in the essay "The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal", took up the project to "relocate some of the vital beginnings of Bengali nationalism away from the recognised kinds of issues in the political sphere into the politics of relationships within the family" (Sarkar 224). She significantly noted that "out of the entire gamut of household relations, it was conjugality that was found to be ideally relevant for this project" (Sarkar 225). By the 1870s, the conjugal space of upper class Hindu household was beginning to be intervened by reformist-cum-colonial-cum-missionary activities like the Brahma Marriage Act of 1873, proposals to introduce divorce in the 1880s, and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. The Hindu nationalists tried to justify the rigorous practice of non-consensual marriage by defining it in terms of "a higher form of love that excelled over allegedly utilitarian, materialist and narrowly contractual western arrangements" (Sarkar 226). They argued, a lifetime of togetherness since infancy could ensure greater compatibility and it would ultimately lead to a complete spiritual union between two mortal souls. With their endeavour to preserve entire system of non-consensual, indissoluble, child marriage, they actually tried to project the Hindu marriage as a love story with a happy ending. In their discourse, chastity of the child bride was treated as a metaphor to chastity of the nation. Tanika Sarkar described the entire procedure in the following languages:

This purity, since it is supposedly a conscious moral choice, becomes at once a sign of difference and of superiority, a Hindu claim to power. The politics of the women's monogamy then is the condition of the possible Hindu nation. The one is often explicitly made to stand in for the other. 'We are but a half civilised, poor, sorrowful, subjected, despised nation. We have but one jewel and for us that is the treasure of seven realms, a priceless gem.' 'Or, 'this so called subjection of our



woman produces this sacred jewel of chastity which still glows radiantly throughout the civilised world despite centuries of political subjection.' Woman's chastity, then, has a real And stated, and not merely symbolic political value (Sarkar 226-27).

Rassundari with her honest and realistic portrayal of the plight of the child marriage, problematised and debunked the Hindu nationalist discourse on conjugality in the 1860s. A completely alternative and contestory picture of infant marriage appeared in Rassundari's description of her experience when she first came to her in laws' house after marriage:

I spent all my days and nights crying. Strange are the ways of God! Your laws are so wonderful! You have taken me from my dear mother and from others I love so much and have brought me to this distant place . . . We arrived at their house and saw different people taking part in all sorts of merrymaking. But none of them was from my part of the country. I did not know a single one of them. I began to weep again. I was so upset that the stream of tears did not cease (Debi 123).

The bleak and sombre experience of the child bride testifies the idealised description of infant marriage by Hindu nationalists. Rassundari did not stop narrating her own situation only, but went on questioning the institution of child marriage. When everybody in the family tried to assure her saying there was no need to be upset because, from now on, she had to consider this house as her own, Rassundari became even more upset and a bit irritated too, hearing their shallow arguments. She put some counter arguments saying "those who have had such experiences perhaps know how useless words seem in times of sorrow. If somebody loses her son, is it wise to rebuke her? Or ask her not to lament, saying he must have been an enemy in an earlier birth. . . ." (Debi 124) Rassundari questioned the sanctity of such marriage when she compared her situation with that of a "caged bird". She lamented that she would have to remain in this cage for life and would never be freed. She demystified the myth of conjugal love in the domestic space of nineteenth century upper class home, while describing her experience of giving birth to children one after another: "When I was forty-one I had my youngest . . . My first child was born when I was eighteen and the last when I was forty-one. God knows what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either." (Debi 126) Absence of love in the conjugal relation between Rassundari and her husband is quite clear from this account. Rassundari went on describing the tiresome drudgery she had spent her entire life in: "I had to work right through the day and the night, without a moment's rest. Suffice it to say that I had no time to think about my own health. So much so that I often did not eat either two



meals. There were days when the pressure of work did not let me even have one meal during the course of the day.” (Debi 126) The incarceration of women within the domestic space of upper class Bengali household is elaborately portrayed by Rassundari through the following words:

I regret to say that I have not taken good care of my own mother . . . she suffered so much for my sake. But I was not of any use to her . . . I am a virtual prisoner here. They never sent me to her because the household work here would suffer. I was allowed to go back to attend some family festival but had to return in a couple of days like a slave. About fifteen people accompanied me on the boat along with two senior men and two maidservants. I was allowed to visit my people only under certain conditions . . . When my mother lay on her deathbed she wanted very badly to see me . . . I tried my utmost but could not go . . . If I were a son I would have flown directly to mother’s bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird (Debi 128-29).

With this antithetical and contestary description of Hindu conjugal space, Rassundari successfully created a rupture in the monolithic idea of nation propagated by Hindu nationalists. The way Rassundari talked about her marriage, conveyed the trauma and not the beauty of infant marriage. Therefore, the Hindu nationalists’ claim that non-consensual Hindu marriages could be more romantic than the western pattern of courtship which, they believed, was based on materialist and utilitarian ground, was vehemently challenged by Rassundari’s account.

While on the one hand, Rassundari was upsetting the Hindu nationalist agenda of rendering women in their contributive role, on the other hand, she became the champion of the cultural politics of nationalism for her staunch religious belief. Kailasbasini Debi (1830-95), in her autobiography *Diary*, proclaimed that religious beliefs and practices are not merely private affairs but they play a very important role in shaping the life of the nation. She believed, “the practices of the outside world which men have to get used to are in the end inconsequential, since what truly matters in the life of the nation are practices in the inner space of community life. Here is the duty of women to hold fast to the religious practices of the community” (Chatterjee 147). In analysing the idea of nationalism in the Indian context, Partha Chatterjee pointed out a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalism in Asia and Africa. He noticed that anticolonial nationalism in Indian context was not limited to its political battle with the imperial power. In fact, it established its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society much before the political battle actually started. While in the “material domain” of economy, statecraft, science and technology, western values reigned supreme, the “spiritual domain” still bore the essential marks of cultural identity. At this point, Chatterjee came up with his unique formula:



“The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture.” (Chatterjee 6)

Rassundari learnt to take recourse to God from her mother when she was leaving her home for in-laws’ house. Her mother advised her to seek refuge in *Dayamadhab* when she is scared. Rassundari shared a very complicated relationship with God. She held God responsible for her sufferings and at the same time she wilfully submitted herself entirely to the almighty. Tanika Sarkar clarified the complexity of their relationship in the following words:

Rassundari calls God the *adhikari* of the theatre of life. He directs a play which is about her life, where she is the audience and where she is also called upon to play the key role. God is the scriptwriter, the director, the manager . . . . She has no idea . . . of what is coming next, nor can she influence the course of the play – even when it is all about herself . . . such is the inscrutable, unaccountable nature of God, such is the play, the *leela*, which gives him satisfaction (Sarkar 230-31).

In *Amar Jiban*, “leela” is not to be understood in terms of the Vaishnavite religious imaginary. The primary site of “leela” here is “a poor, mangled, helpless human life, marked by many sorrows, losses, frustrated desires.” (Sarkar 231) Here Rassundari turned out to be a “bhakta” who submitted herself completely to the will of God. Thus by subjugating herself, she gained immense agency. She could do whatever she wanted because all her wants belonged to the God she worshipped, she could even transgress social norms for it was God who wanted her to do that. She cited various instances where she acted out God’s will. As for example, she narrated the occasion when her husband made accessible to her the same book, *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, that she dreamt of last night. She firmly believed that her submission to the lord enabled her to begin reading anew. Therefore, the same domestic space, that was nothing better than a prison house to Rassundari, turns out to be a space of emancipation for her. In analysing the place of “home’ in the nationalist project, Partha Chatterjee made a significant comment:

The home, I suggest, was not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched. Women from the new middle class in nineteenth-century India thus became active agents in the nationalist project – complicit in the framing of its hegemonic strategies as much as they were resistant to them because of their subordination under the new forms of patriarchy (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 148).



Concept of nationalism has undergone a massive change in the contemporary times. As far as the postcolonial nations of Asia and Africa are concerned, nationalism is no longer regarded there as a feature of the struggle against the imperial power. Nationalism in these regions took up a form of ethnic assertion. In order to understand the complexity of the newly acquired definition of nationalism, Benedict Anderson demonstrated how nations are merely an act of imagination of the people who inhabit it. He also described how through the dissemination of “print capitalism”<sup>iv</sup> the “imagined community” came into existence. Partha Chatterjee, in *Nation and its Fragments*, elaborated on the loopholes of the concept in Asian and African context. He also took it upon himself to display how the “inner” domain of colonial society was already sovereign, even when the state is ruled by the imperial power. Therefore, in order to understand “nation” through Rassundari’s words, the dynamics of this historical project is to be taken into consideration. Chatterjee critiqued Anderson’s idea of nation as “an empty homogenous time” to be a utopic vision: “People can only imagine themselves in empty homogenous time<sup>v</sup>, they do not live in it. Empty homogenous time is the utopian time of capital . . . empty homogenous time is not located anywhere in real space – it is utopian. The real space of modern life is a heterotopia<sup>vi</sup> . . . Time here is heterogenous, unevenly dense.” (Chatterjee, *Anderson’s Utopia* 131) The nation that is being re-scripted through Rassundari’s words is –

the heterotopic location- the non-empty space – where Rashundari lives. It is non-empty as it is filled in, among other things, by the frail, degenerate, old body of the author – a theatre for the changes wrought in the body and mind of Rassundari. Bharatbarsha is the stage for the enactment of “her life.” It is filled in by the quotidian of her existence, by her family, her god. (Das 31)

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### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> “This generally signifies an addition of women into the framework of conventional history . . . In this sense, with a few exceptions, the women worked within boundaries laid down by men. The history uncovered in this way is a ‘contributive’ history.” Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), pp. 260-61.

<sup>ii</sup> “Pracina eham nabina,” in BR, pp. 249-56.

<sup>iii</sup> In the two centuries preceding the colonial age, carit was described as a distinctive literary genre of religious and secular hagiographic writings in Sanskrit. In the nineteenth century, the



idea of carit has undergone a massive change abandoning its previous meaning. In the modern sense, it came to be understood as the life of an illustrious man.

<sup>iv</sup>Print capitalism is a theory which, according to Anderson, is the root of the formation of the nation-state. Print media, especially newspapers, is considered to be the foundation that allowed people to start seeing themselves as a unified nation. Since print languages were developed keeping in view the demands of consumers, Anderson calls this entire idea print capitalism.

<sup>v</sup>In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin coins the phrase “empty, homogenous time.” Under this view, time bears no essential relationship to human history. Time is only an instrument of ordering events. There is no difference between the moments of the past, present and future - they only constitute sequence of events. According to Anderson, the modern concept of nationalism is impossible to understand without viewing time as empty and homogenous. Anderson argues that the feeling of nationhood depends on a shared sense existence among its people.

<sup>vi</sup>In the essay “Of Other Spaces”, Foucault developed the idea of “heterotopias”. According to Foucault, “heterotopias” are real spaces that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.

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