Gender Identity & Narrative Perspectives in Indian Woman Autobiographies

Sub-Topic: Rassundori Devi’s “Amar Jibon” (My Life)

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ABSTRACT

“Amar Jiban” or My Life was the first published autobiography by a female author in Bengali literature, having its publication in 1876. It was an extraordinary step towards change, considering the fact that Rassundari Deviwas the odd one of unusual authors: an economically challenged girl, religious woman and a dedicated housewife. It was tough for a female to provide education to girls. It was not even allowed to be thought of. It portrays Rassundari’s life as a whole: all the incidents from her childhood to the advent of her marriage, married life and life after marriage. On a deeper note it depicts the uneasiness, dissatisfaction and even frustration she had gone through for being forced to follow certain monotonous rules. Her marriage, her household chores, everyday life–gives the reader an entry into the life of a feudal housewife in 19th century reformist Bengal but also brings into light the issues of inequality, oppression and lack of opportunity for women. The book creates a picture of the changing world the status and role of women and Rassundari Devi’s own views on the changing times.

Amar Jiban gives an insight into the life of a housewife in the house of a prosperous East Bengali zamindars. It groups the saddening realities of a girl child in the 19th century. It talks about the pain, forced decisions and oppression that are faced by a woman. It reflects great loss and acry for help. It also, however, talks of resilience. It talks about the women who determined to live her own life despite being held back by custom and usage. Amar Jiban speaks in lucid prose of a woman who taught herself to read and write beneath the black veil of her society. A woman who wrote the first published autobiography, a woman who practised writing letters on a kitchen wall.

In a nutshell this book essays a message of hope.
A girl’s hope for leading a better life.
An individual’s hope for help from the divine.
A caged woman’s hope for a better future.

Rassundari Devi challenged the norms by her way of life itself by dreaming of what was deemed wrong. By passionately chasing that dream which she wanted to fulfill. By actually learning to write, and by telling this moving story of her life, she set a benchmark of what a woman can achieve if she had the courage to break the norms of the society.

History:
The first part of Rassundari Devi’s “Amar Jiban” was written in 1868. She was 88 when she wrote the second part of her autobiography. It was published in 1906. The first part of “Amar Jiban” was published in 1876. It was a historic event that a woman’s autobiography was published in Bengali. Tarabai Shinde’s “Stri Purush Talana” (1882) in which men and women were compared and it caused ripples in the society of those times, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati’s “The High-Caste Hindu Woman” (1887), were published much later than Rassundari Devi’s Bengali autobiography. Swarnakumari Devi of the Tagore family also got involved with Bengali literature much later when she started editing a Bengali literary magazine in 1884. The first part of Rassundari Devi’s “Amar Jiban” was written in 1868. She was 88 when she wrote the second part of her autobiography. It was published in 1906.

Background:
During the 19th and early 20th century, upper caste Hindu as well as Muslim women were living a life similar to that of prisoners, while living under the veil. We find the description of the pathetic situation of women in the novels of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. But the description is even more powerful in “Amar Jiban”. She had to work with her “ghomta” (veil) even in her kitchen. Her voice had to be lowered while talking to maidservants so that no male servant or family member could hear her voice. Even the voice of a woman was imprisoned in the cage of the veil. “Amar Jiban” is a document that tells us how purdah (veil) was a part of the culture of Bengal. Centuries of patriarchal domination had normalised women into living under such practices and they considered it their rightful duty to remain in this jail.
Rassundari Devi's story is around one and a half century old. Circumstances have changed and women can now come out and pursue education. But we should not forget that it was the sacrifices and actions of such strong women that paved the way for later generations of women. Such inspirational figures are the strength behind the present feminist and women’s rights movements.

**Gender Identity & Narrative Perspective:**

Rassundari Devi is among the earliest woman writers in Bengali literature. Her autobiography Amar Jiban (My Life) is known as the first published autobiography in Bengali language. Rassundari Devi lived in times when social reform had barely touched the lives of upper class/caste women in India. Education was unimaginable for women and a literate woman was synonymous with a wicked/cursed human being. But Rassundari refused to remain an uneducated woman all her life. She taught herself to read and write, and constructed for herself an identity which was independent of her husband and children. She not only earned literacy by stern dedication and hard work, but also used it for self-discovery.

- **Rassundari Devi: An Early Feminist**

Rassundari Devi’s life was a series of actions and decisions that are serious departures from the patriarchal social norms of her time and are, therefore, ‘transgressions’ punishable by the society. Rassundari Devi learned to read and write amidst the popular belief in those days that women who gained literacy brought disaster upon their families and were punished by God with widowhood. Not only did she learn to read, but she also decided to record the events and details of her everyday domestic life in a book and got it published. She had the audacity to disclose her life in print and make it public to the people. By doing this, she entered the public sphere which was strictly forbidden to upper class Hindu women. A published work no longer remains a private act of writing but enters the public domain where it is open and available for perusal and interrogation by anyone. So there are three major “transgressions” that Rassundari Devi commits according to patriarchy: reading, writing entering the public sphere.

Rassundari also made a notable departure from the common patriarchal belief that female worship can only be expressed in the form of rituals like vrats (fasts), penance, and cooking bhoga (food for god). Rassundari rejected these conventional, ritualistic forms of woman’s devotion that served in maintaining the patriarchal social structures, and established an intellectual relationship with her God by learning to read Chaitanya Bhagavata. She chose to engage in a kind of worship where she is an active participant (like her husband and other men), not a passive devotee.

Many Bengali male authors and poets who came after Rassundari Devi wrote about the greatness of a housewife by positing her as ‘grihalakshmi’ or the domesticated goddess. Patriarchy has always presented the figure of a grihalakshmi as an ideal woman whose salvation and satisfaction lay in her endless servitude, and whose happiness lies in the happiness of her husband (master) and children. Rassundari Devi, in her writing, demystifies the figure of the grihalakshmi by presenting her domestic duties as labour which is tiresome, repetitive, unrecognised, and far from emotionally fulfilling. Instead of viewing labour in an aesthetic and romanticized way as male writers like Tagore tended to do, Rassundari deconstructs the iconic figure of the housewife in “Amar Jiban.” She also demystifies the nurturing maternal figure by describing her work of feeding and looking after children as physically laborious. In this manner, Rassundari’s lifewriting contests the male representation of women in literature. Rassundari Devi’s life writing (autobiography) is a testimony of the odds against education of women of her generation.

Rassundari describes her child marriage and the agony of separation from her mother thus:

“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.” In fact, the metaphor of a bird being caged is quite dominant in Rassundari’s autobiography. She saw herself as a prisoner of marriage from where she wished to break free and transcend her worldly duties as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law to meet her God.

Rassundari Devi has described her experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in a very detailed and frank manner at a time when they were considered taboo topics for women to speak. Writing about her pregnancy and sharing it with the public by publishing is certainly a very feminist thing to do.

Rassundari Devi, while writing about the hardships she had to face as a child bride and the risks she had to take to gain literacy, rejoices in the fact that the times are changing and some parents have started educating their daughters. Rassundari Devi is definitely an advocate of women’s right to education, though she doesn’t mention it explicitly in her autobiography. Rassundari Devi’s life story is an inspiration and a testimony of a woman’s will power to fight all odds in order to gain education and liberation.
Conclusion:
Rassundari Devi’s book “Amar Jiban” (My life) meant a lot more to the blossoming of the Bengal Renaissance. Hers was the voice of feminine gender. What more, by writing it, she — even if unwittingly — transplanted a “Western literary genre” i.e “Autobiography” into a very Indian ambience, by the first feminist.

References
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All that we are is the result of what we have thought.

~ Buddha