The Flight of the 'Caged Bird': An Autobiography of Rassundari Devi in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India

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Abstract

Amar Jiban (*My Life* in English, *Mera Jeevan* in Hindi) was originally written by Rassundari Devi (born in 1809) in Bengali and was first published in 1868. Translated in English by Enakshi Chatterjee in 1999, this book remains one of the most significant books by women writers in Bengali. This book is noted to be the first ever autobiography written by an Indian woman (and may be the first autobiography in Bengali); therefore, offering much valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, injustices that the 19th century women had/faced and also the resilience that they showed against all these hardships. Rassundari, an illiterate woman, who taught herself how to read and write in utmost secrecy due to social ban on women's literacy, establishes this autobiography not only as a significant landmark in the history of Indian Feminism, but also as a literary achievement, commended for its simple, dispassionate, objective style and the well-connected, coherent and polished prose. Rassundari remains relevant even after almost one hundred and fifty years later due to the three major 'transgressions' that she committed according to patriarchy: reading, writing, and entering the public sphere.

Keywords: Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, Women's autobiography, 19th century women, Women's literacy

> 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.
>
> — Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*)

That was Rassundari's reflection on her marriage while being carried away to her marital home when she was merely twelve. *Amar Jiban* (*My Life* in English, *Mera Jeevan* in Hindi) by Rassundari Devi (1809-1899) was first published

in 1868 when she was 59 years old. It is the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman; the first autobiography written in Bengali and may be the first ever autobiography in India written by a woman. Rassundari added a second part to the book when she was 88 and published it in 1897.

Before we examine the significance of Rassundari Devi's autobiography in nineteenth century colonial India, let us first briefly explore the genre of women's autobiography to put *Amar Jiban* in a relevant context. The specific domain of women's autobiography started to garner popular and then academic interest (in the West) not before the mid-twentieth century. While women's autobiographies like *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) by Mary McCarthy, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) by Anne Moody, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou created a popular interest in this field, it was only in the 1980s that women's autobiography began to be considered a serious academic area for research. The critical tools that started to prove useful for that purpose were manifold—most important of those being feminism, literary theory, and cultural theory. Then followed a stream of exhaustive and diverse studies/collections in/of women's autobiography such as Domna C. Stanton's collection titled *The Female Autograph* (1984), *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987) by Sidonie Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998), edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson and many more.

In India, we have only a few published women autobiographies, like *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*) by Rassundari Devi in 1868, *Amar Katha* (*My Story*), and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (*My Life as an Actress*) by Binodini Dasi in 1912 and 1924-25 respectively, *Aaydan* (*The Weave of My Life*) by Urmila Pawar in 2003, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, and fewer books on women's autobiography, such as *Indian Women's Autobiographies* (1993) by Ranjana Harish, *Indian Women Autobiographies: A Study of Gender Identity* (2012) by Krati Sharma, *Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Critical Appraisal* (2016) by Bijender Singh, *Ahead of their Times: Essays on Women Autobiography in India* (2020) edited by K. Purushotham etc.

But be it West or East, the primary queries that guide both the critics and readers while reading women's autobiographies, especially of the early

era, are quite fundamental in nature: how does the woman autobiographer establish her authorship? How does she negotiate her gendered identity as already established in social/cultural/literary narratives while expressing herself? How does she handle her sexuality in her literary expression of the self? How does she create a balance between her need for self-expression and her fear of immoderate self- exposure? Does she try to establish an authentic self while breaking free from the chains of oppression or does she lead us towards her hybrid self? The queries remain endless while it is not unsurprising to discover that Rassundari Devi too leads us to explore most of these primary queries through her text.

Amar Jiban can be roughly divided into three primary sections to facilitate the exploration of indisputably one of the most significant texts in nineteenth century colonial India—from Rassundari's early childhood till her marriage, from her marriage till her widowhood, and then her spiritual state of being. While the third section, her spiritual journey, is covered in the entire second part which she added when she was 88, the first and second sections quite appear like mirror states of each other. Each and every one of her fears, losses, hopes and instances of helplessness described in the first section (from her early childhood till her marriage) comes alive once again in the second part of the book (from her marriage till her widowhood). Or maybe it was an intentional narrative technique adopted by her while writing the book to highlight and revisit the most traumatic episodes in her life.

For example, she remembers and identifies her fear of being kidnapped by a child lifter as her most morbid fear in her childhood when her mother introduced this idea to her. Her mother then would try to calm her down with two assurances—that the child lifters kidnap only the naughty and quarrelsome children and that Dayamadhav (their family deity) will always protect her in any kind of calamity. So, the little girl learnt to do two things—never resist or report any kind of bullying and to blindly rely on her Dayamadhav in a world where no human would/could save her from the eventual calamities.

This morbid fear of being kidnapped, however, comes alive very soon for her through the guise of her marriage at the age of twelve. Rassundari describes her marriage and its emotional impact on her in the following days just like someone who has been kidnapped. As a child lifter would tempt a

child with attractive toys first, she too "was cheered up by the ornaments, the red wedding sari, and the wedding music" (34). But very soon her happiness turned into a nightmare as the time to leave, unaccompanied by anyone from her own family, for her marital home came, she felt "like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams" (35). Although everyone thought that she would very soon settle down into her new life and new role, Rassundari continued to cry for years, feeling kidnapped for decades: "Even now I remember those days. / The caged bird, the fish caught in the net" (36). Even later, when it seemed like she had finally accepted her new role, it was the acceptance of hopelessness by a prisoner: "Look at me now. I am no longer free. I have learned to work for others" (44).

As for the next mirror image Rassundari upholds in her book, we find that before her marriage she helped a sick aunt with her housework voluntarily, although she was not required to do any at her own home. But once her family found out about it they became very happy and that in turn encouraged Rassundari to be engaged with this even more; though this time it might not have been something that she really wanted: "Thus my days of playing childhood games were gone, there were no more games for me, only household chores" (32). This motif comes back later in all its unpleasantness when she describes how she had to take care of her blind mother-in-law, take care of her husband (and later children too), cook for and serve food to almost twenty-six people every day, take care of the family deity, take care of the many guests who frequently visited their home, and do all the household work single-handedly. She was only fourteen at that time: "My day used to begin very early—and there was no respite from housework till long past midnight. I could not rest, even for a moment" (43). Tanika Sarkar notes in this context how the image of the ideal Indian Woman was created by the patriarchy in a colonized nation to find respite in a self-sacrificing, docile and pious woman at home after being exposed to the regular humiliation of colonization, while that very colonized state made women's literacy to the contemporary Bengalis an attractive concept (58). But Rassundari never conforms to this image or any Cult of Domesticity as an ideal woman who finds happiness and fulfillment in her role as a wife and mother. She never demonstrates her happiness generating from her domestic

burden. At the most, she approaches the herculean load of her housework as her duty, nothing else. She also never gives any credit to the contemporary society for her literacy, which she repeatedly maintains to have been achieved by the Dayamadhav's blessings, and the determination and hard labour by her, against active social censure. She even donates the earnings from her book to Dayamadhav, not to her family.

As for the theme of motherhood, we find Rassundari placing a very pertinent set of mirror images in this context as well. Before her marriage, Rassundari took the infant son of a relative under her wing. She "loved him dearly, never let him out of sight, bathing, feeding, carrying him all the time. I never let him cry" (31). But the child dies which she describes very briefly: "Suddenly the child fell ill and died. His death plunged me into grief" (32). Likewise, Rassundari, a mother of twelve children, out of which only five survived, is shown to engage with the role of an affectionate mother only when she loses Pyarilal, her third son. He died quite young and Rassundari had dreamt about it beforehand: "I saw that my Pyarilal ….died ….in the dream l began to tremble and fell to the ground weeping…. I cannot describe how desperate l felt. I wanted to jump into the pyre. . . calling the name of my son loudly and crying" (80-81). Except for this poignant description, Rassundari never displays any emotional episode with/for any of her children although she perfectly fulfills her child rearing responsibilities. But then she also describes the burden of 'mother work' in the most factual way when she presents the list of her twelve children and says, "My first child was born when l was eighteen and the last when l was forty-one. God only knows what l had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either" (46).

However, the mirror images which form the crux of this book are about the education of Rassundari. She remembers early in the book how as a child she would be left in the school at their outer house by her family for the whole day. Since she was eight till she was ten, she used to be there and watched the boys learn and practice all the alphabets. Girls were not allowed to study at that time and nobody thought that she was paying any attention either. But Rassundari was different: "Since l used to be there all the time l learned all the letters by myself. But nobody had any knowledge of this" (24). Similarly, as Rassundari remembers, in her marital house, with an educated husband, sons

who were learning the alphabets and lots of books lying around, her hunger for education remained unfulfilled and unnoticed. Rassundari's fear of social censure was so severe that she "dared not look at a page with written letters on it, in case they attributed it to my desire for learning" (44).

As her desire for learning grew, her feelings of helplessness grew with it: "I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read. How could l? What a peculiar situation l had placed myself in" (51). Eventually she decides not to accept this situation and resolves to take matters in her own hands. In her extremely hectic housework schedule and while taking care of four small children, she takes a page out of her husband's *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, hides it in the kitchen storage, takes a page from her eldest son's alphabet practice book, remembers the alphabets that she learnt as an onlooker in the classroom as a child and tries to match those letters in utmost secrecy in kitchen, so that not a single soul in the large household catches her doing that. She managed to learn the alphabets finally, but could not manage to learn how to write as that needed an elaborate preparation and could not be done in secrecy. Although, she was happy that she managed to learn the letters on her own and now could read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and other religious books at house (she emphasizes it repeatedly that she learnt the letters only to read religious books), she nonetheless is very forthright in her pointing out the social injustice involved: "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted that l had to go through all these humiliation just because l was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence" (54).

Rassundari learns to write much later. It was not before one of her sons moved away for higher studies and demands to get letters written by her at regular intervals. But she could manage the time to learn and practice writing only when her husband falls ill and she has to accompany him for treatment at another place where the load of housework was much lighter.

All these episodes make it clear why Rassundari always found her marriage, her housework, her motherhood a strain. She refers to her life as a life in captivity again and again in *Amar Jiban*: "I am no longer free," (44) "But l am helpless. I am a caged bird," (50) "We were completely under the control of men," (52) "I was in my parents' home and then the next twenty-eight years of my life were spent in captivity," (62) "But in those days women

did not enjoy any freedom at all, they could not do anything on their own, they were totally under others. It was like the life of a bird in a cage," (63) "I was married at the age of twelve. Since then l have completely lost my freedom," (72) "But live the caged life of a wild beast," (78) and so on. It is no wonder that she learnt to write once she was quite old and free from a lot of her domestic duties. It might also explain the fact that her autobiography was published the year following her husband's death.

Although Rassundari describes her domestic life and activities in detail, she never explores any kind of romantic relationship with her husband in her book. Although, it might very well be attributed to the natural bashfulness of a nineteenth century Indian woman, that does not seem to be the probable cause once we come across Rassundari's brief account of her husband in *Amar Jiban*, which she claims happened only because of the narrative demand of her book, not because she felt compelled to write about him. She does not give any flattering description of her husband—neither physically nor mentally, besides the customary good words about him. She describes him as rather flabby and as someone who "liked lawsuits" (89). In fact, the only account of her husband in *Amar Jiban* is not primarily about him, but about Rassundari herself, how she resolved a legal dispute that her husband had with a powerful landlord. The dispute had continued for three generations, but Rassundari resolved it in a moment of crisis when none of the men in charge of the household were around to handle it. She also describes in detail her fear of displeasing him by doing so. Even when she describes the death of her husband, she notes it in a very restrained manner (mentioning the death of their family priest in the same paragraph) and rather presents it as her social disgrace: "Shaving of the head is worse than death….my husband died. The gold crown tumbled from my head after all these years…. Now at the fag end of my life I encountered widowhood…. I feel embarrassed to talk about it" (74).

While it might appear that Rassundari never grew close to her husband and carried her wifely role quite as a duty without any significant romantic attachment, she almost never shows any remarkable emotional involvement with any of the people in her life through her autobiography. The only exceptions are the child she took care of in her childhood, Pyarilal in her dream sequence, and most importantly, her mother. Rassundari is her mother's daughter, she

refuses to believe that she ever had a father (he died when she was four and she did not remember him) and if she was socially introduced as her father's daughter—"the daughter of Padmalochan Rai"—she felt upset (26). Rassundari loved her mother dearly, found her very beautiful, could do anything to impress her, never wanted to part with her, followed her teachings blindly till her last breath and considered her to be her first and only teacher. So, when she recounts how she was denied a visit to her dying mother because the housework at her marital home would suffer, Rassundari, for the only time in her autobiography, loses her calm and dispassionate demeanor and pours forth her anger and frustration over the social imposition of a gendered role playing: "Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life!...If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother's bedside" (50).

Some of the most notable critics of women's autobiography like W. E. B. Du Bois or Susan Stanford Friedman believe that to counter 'the paralysis of consciousness' a socially oppressed group must learn to connect and trust each other (Friedman 76). But, Rassundari does not have any such group identity as she found herself existing in a society where other girls of her age or the elderly women around her were most likely to prevent her from being her free self—free to dislike housework, free to feel exhausted by the demands of motherhood, free to learn the alphabets and write. Even when she feels the socially imposed gender roles to be unjust for women, she maintains that it is completely her personal observation as she does "not know how other girls feel" (36).

And maybe this is why she claims her authorship not through the solidarity of a group of oppressed women or through a supportive husband but through a God, omnipotent, and obeyed by all. As Rassundari never reported or resisted any bullying in her childhood, she continued the same practice throughout her adult life and rather decided to open up only to Dayamadhav: "Nobody knew of my sorrow. How could they know, for my face lay hidden. Only you knew because you are my father, my God….You know all that l have experienced; l cannot keep anything back from you" (44-45). And thus, develops a strange pattern in Rassundari's autobiography, whenever she describes some distressing, humiliating, unjust episode in her married life, she almost always ends that episode with an invocation and prayer to her

Dayamadhav and praising him for giving her the strength and courage to bear all these. It is as if Rassundari has a twofold goal here. While she makes it very clear that no human could earn her trust enough (even her mother gave her "away to strangers,") it was only her God who could become her refuge, her confidante, her only protector (38). The second purpose that her Dayamadhav fulfilled was to moderate the effect of the apparent social and religious transgressions that Rassundari made as someone who was acutely aware of the social condemnation that she was inviting through her unconventional desires and actions.

This is quite a curious point to note here that autobiography is considered to have developed from the genre of religious confessions, as exemplified in Saint Augustine, Saint Teresa or in Margery Kempe (Kempe was probably the first autobiographer in English). But, even though Rassundari's *Amar Jiban* is wholly dedicated to Dayamadhav, Rassundari manages to create a split between the self she perceives to be authentic and the socially restricted, conventional self which is supposedly shaped by the scriptures she loved. Therefore, *Amar Jiban* focuses more on Rassundari's individuation and less on her religious confessions like her predecessors in this genre. Rassundari's use of the mode of religious confession seems to be more like her way of establishing her authorship in a time, in a society where only a divine approval could let her write what she was about to write, to express the thoughts and feelings that were way too inappropriate for a dutiful wife, pious daughter-in-law, and a sacrificing mother figure.

This omnipotent God not only gives her the power of authority over her life experiences as a woman but also allows her to subvert the customary religious sayings like when she says that "[y]our husband, sons, people, wealth/ are only images" in the line of commonly practised words by male ascetics who leave or stay detached from their wife/family which they consider only to be an illusion (43). This also proves Rassundari's uniqueness regarding the observation of the critics like Mary Mason who believe that women autobiographers always build themselves in relation to the others around them (Friedman 78).

As noted by critics like Rita Felski, women autobiographies are also found to carry the note of self-castigation in their texts (88). Regina Blackburn,

Patricia Meyer Spacks and others think, this trait emerges from the problematic internalization of gender ideologies by women autobiographers who become enmeshed in their effort to oppose and focus on the very notions that reject them as autonomous identities thereby either looking at themselves through patriarchy or looking and disliking the powerlessness in themselves (Felski 88). If we study *Amar Jiban*, we can find that although Rassundari appears to paint herself as a timid girl, calling herself foolish/ignorant/naïve frequently in the book, it always seems to be a tempering strategy to balance her delving into the exposure of the social injustices in her book. She, for example, describes the episode of Joyhari, her husband's horse whom she avoided because of her bashfulness. Rassundari quite masterfully shows how in a society, at a home where a wife is strictly ordered to pull the end of the sari down to her chest, to always work in utter silence (these conditions made her to compare herself with a bull on tether,) to not step outside of the inner house (not even to the outer section of her own house,) a woman will eventually feel bashful even in front of a male horse belonging to her husband (42). While others thought that she was scared of the horse, Rassundari shares her secret only with the readers and eventually decides to stop hiding from the horse as she realizes the foolishness of the act. Rassundari never really castigates herself or finds herself less than others. Where we feel that she is doing those, a careful reading of the text shows that it is her strategy to not appear rebellious while uncovering the absurd social customs and restrictions for her readers.

Another issue of concern for the critics of women autobiographies like Sidonie Smith is the writers of the earliest phase being uncomfortable with their femininity and sexuality. This is also quite understandable as the women autobiographers at that time were indubitably stepping into a predominantly male domain and committing three major 'transgressions' according to patriarchy—reading, writing, and entering a public domain. Although, Rassundari never attempts any description of her conjugal life with her husband in a romantic way, she however, distinctly discusses her own physical beauty (and the lack of it in old age), her child bearing years and her love for food in her old age (she at times went without food for consecutive days due to the pressure of housework in her youth). She also mentions how with the advance of age she lost all other identities and now she is known only as the mother of her children. But she makes it clear to the reader that she does not find it a natural

progression: "Now I am a mother to everybody. The name which I once had at my parents' place is long forgotten" (88).

Rassundari knew her society well and she successfully chose a narrative style in order to diffuse the effect of her nonconformist autobiography on conventional society like repeatedly highlighting herself as an ignorant, helpless woman who did all her social transgressions (reading, writing, and publishing) in the name of God, or elaborately describing all the incessant housework she perfectly did while obliquely mentioning how she found it torturous, or giving us a list of all the twelve children she bore while describing how they would not even let her sleep or eat, telling us how she always obeyed the social customs while letting us know that she found those very customs humiliating, absurd or at times inhuman. The Nineteenth-century colonial India did not let Rassundari live a life of dignity and freedom just because she was a woman. Whatever freedom Rassundari achieved was through her books and her autobiography. It was not her social success as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife or mother that gave her much desired wings—it was only the alphabets that helped her fly. And that is why even when at the end of the book she insists that she has lived a full life and has no more earthly desire left within her, she also appears anxious about the reception of her book among the readers. While concluding her autobiography she makes a dignified request to her readers to respect her effort, to honour her wings that were not inherited but achieved through a lifelong refusal to be caged: "This book is written by my own hand. I am not literate in the real sense. Do not neglect it my dear readers, do not look down upon it" (122).

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