

Rasasundari Devi: The Precursor of Bengali Woman Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Rasasundari Devi, an advocate of woman's right to education was the precursor of Bengali Women writers on the way to the advancement of pinnacle. In the then patriarchal society, women were considered as mere commodity; a living object for domestic, menial works; child bearer and sexual pleasure giver. Though Rasasundari was born in an upper class Zamindar family in Pabna District, Bangladesh, she was not allowed to learn in her childhood. She was self-taught, high-caste Hindu house wife from a conservative rural household. "Amar Jiban" (My Life) by Rasasundari Devi is a very inspiring and motivating, and first full length autobiographical writing, an important genre of literature. Written in chaste Bangla, her unconvoluted style marks the advent of a new mode of writing, often identified as the modern formal one. Within the bastion of the restrictive norms and rituals, her style of writing spans from a humble submissive tone, to one of religious fervours, to scathing sarcasm and, at times, a wry chronicling of the disconcerting reality around her through innocuous statements. The very act of writing and the choice of subject matter can be seen as an emancipatory attempt by an unknown, unlettered, self-taught vaisnavite, devout middle aged house wife. It is a unique document in its charting and exploration of the issues of identity and subjectivity and above all, its thematizing of literary. A multi-intentioned, polyvalent and polysomic content lay blandly enfolded within seemingly innocent statement, or even within apparent contradictions. The Nationalist Scholar Dinesh Chandra Sen saw in her the self-effacing image of feminine nurture, an iconoclast in the mind of the Motherland herself.

Key-words: Imprisonment, dependent identity, family deity, patriarchal institution, caged bird, determination, advocate of Education.

'AMAR JIBAN' (MY LIFE) BY RASASUNDARI DEVI: A VOICE OF PROTEST?

'Amar Jiban' by Rasasundari Devi is a very inspiring and motivating, and first full length autobiographical writing, an important genre of literature. Written in chaste Bangla, her unconvoluted style marks the advent of a new mode of writing, often identified as the modern formal one. Within the bastion of the restrictive norms and rituals, her style of writing spans from a humble submissive tone, to one of religious fervours, to scathing sarcasm and, at times, a wry chronicling of the disconcerting reality around her through innocuous statements. The very act of writing and the choice of subject matter can be seen as an emancipatory attempt by an unknown, unlettered, self-taught vaisnavite, devout middle-aged house wife. Her childhood was an unusual one when she flowered under the protective gaze of her mother. However, quite shy and apprehensive in nature and interestingly, as an amulet her mother taught her to invoke the **family deity Dayamadhav**, at any moment of anxiety. It is indeed noteworthy to find that even as a child her sense of identity appears very strong as to be introduced as her father's daughter would leave her distraught. When one day she realized that she was being married off, she became perplexed. The forced separation from her mother makes her self-aware the pitiable plight of younger girls and she laments that ".....it is indeed a sad thing to leave one's parents, settle in some other place, and leave under other people". She appropriately captures the ".....state of (her) mind.....like a sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar". She hauntingly captures that 'hopeless situation' and reproaches God in a tone of praise for such dilapidated condition of female child. On the way to in-law's house she repeatedly uses the images of the "Caged Bird the fish caught in the net"—having no way to get rid of it. This is an incisive critic of the domestic space which enforced seclusion on the household women. Being a house wife she fulfils all the obligations. She asserts that "I did everything in a spirit of deity" that is certainly indicative of the emotional detachment. She projects an under lying sarcastic scathing

attack towards patriarchal hegemony when she jots down the patriarchal mentality of the people about female educational (Stree shiksha). Life becomes more challenging for her when she gives birth to twelve children and the demands of the situation are so grave that she frequently has to go through without meals or rest. But she confidently claims “Blessed is my life, my birth. I am grateful for everything”. When she was denied to visit her ailing mother, Rasasundari’s calm tone breaks in to a virtual revolt and a stern critique of the family life as she does not shy to call herself “a virtual prisoner here”. She records the painful and clandestine efforts that she has to use to master the alphabets. Amidst her daily household activities, she learns to read Chaitanya Bhagvata in her kitchen. The kitchen which has been the site of her imprisonment, miraculously, gets transformed into a sanctuary for her dangerous desires and ultimately leads her to the apex of success. Her clandestine education avoiding the coiling eyes of patriarchy is an emancipatory triumph. Humour becomes a very important tool in combating the brutalities of everyday life. She repeatedly records the pejorative attitude of common folk towards women’s education. We have never found a better spokesperson than Rasasundari over child marriage and the deep sear that it left on its young victims. She exposes the shallow motives of male dominated society behind this evil practice which were the fear of female sexuality and the anxiety to control it within the bounds of legitimate conjugal relationship. She is the representative of all Bengali housewives who remain behind purdah, the traditional ‘Griha Lakhmi’ concept of womanhood. She also raises her voice of protest against the woman’s man-dependent identity. Fervouring on the divinity she also criticises patriarchal narrow mentality about the woman’s sole responsibility of domesticity. She is an advocate of women’s right to education. Her life is an inspiration and a testimony of woman willpower to fight all hurdles and hindrances in order to gain education and liberation. Such an auto-biographical portrayal through the female gaze is also an instance of much coverage and candour. Dinesh Chandra Sen. has rightly said that Amar Jiban (AJ) was not merely “the account of Rasasundari but a story of all Hindu women of her time”.

CHILDHOOD MARRIAGE & DEPARTURE TO IN-LAW’S HOUSE

‘Amar Jiban’ by Rasasundari Devi, a self-taught, high caste Hindu house-wife from a conservative rural household is an interesting and motivating first full span autobiographical literary piece, an important genre of literature. It is a unique document in its charting and exploration of the issues of identity and subjectivity and above all, its thematizing of literacy. The book is written in an older cacophonous conversation with quotidian details from a mundane life, in the uses of prose but she cancels out the humble self-deprecatory and pious denials of the significance of her life events and life text in the very title of the book itself. The verse colophons of the first part or the near hagiographical structure, given to her narrative made her immune from certain kinds of attack. Events and comments form a continuous, spindling chain, each succeeding the other, and each unit creating an alluvial soil for larger and more complex subsequent ponderings, and expending and looping world of meaning. Rasasundari’s childhood was an unusual one when she followed under the protective gaze of her mother. However, quite shy and apprehensive in nature and interestingly, as an amulet her mother taught her to invoke the family deity Dayamadhav, at any moment of anxiety. Having lost her father very early in life, with no memory of his, she seems not to have let go off the umbilical cord and remained deeply attached to her mother. In the 3rd composition she describes how she was indeed in for a rude shock when one day she realised that she was being married off with Sitanath Sarkar, a Vaisnavite Zaminder of Faridpur. Her pleadings went in vain as the childhood marriage was the patriarchal pre-setup institutions. Her mother consoled her invoking the name of family deity—“if you ever feel afraid, think of God”. Women were treated as mere commodities having no emotion, passion or assertion. They were the puppets in the hand of patriarchy. The forced separation from her mother made her self-aware of the pitiable plight of young girls and she lamented that “.....it is indeed a sad thing to leave one’s parents.....and live under other people”. She appropriately described the “.....state of (her) mind.....like a sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar”. Rasasundari hauntingly captured the ‘hopeless (ness)’ of the situation and the only thing that sustained her were the re-assuring words of her mother who had promised her of the omniscient God’s constant companionship with her. Rasasundari continued with her lament on this forcible separation and could find no way to come to terms with it. The company of strange people in the boat tried to console her. While she was going to her in-law’s house she repeatedly used the images—“The Caged Bird, the fish caught in a net”.

“Well, I was like a Caged Bird”. She castigated an underlying sarcastic scathing attack towards patriarchal hegemony. When everyone talked of having reached ‘the home’, her spirits somewhat revived. But sorrow engulfed her ‘like a raging forest fire’ having found no one familiar to her. She was in perpetual exile. Rasasundari herein echoes the voices of countless young brides in 19th centuries India, who found themselves abruptly thrust into sexual awakening—often with devastating consequences—at puberty, and along with it, adult responsibilities: from child’s play to ‘woman’s work’. In the anecdote, play full in tone Rasasundari writes simply, “And so ended my days of playing in the dust; there was no more play after that—I only worked”.

RASASUNDARI— THE ADVOCATE OF WOMAN’S EDUCATION

Though Rasasundari Devi, an advocate of woman’s right to education was born in an upper class Zamindar family; she was never allowed to learn in her childhood. In her father’s house a missionary lady had a small pathshala (school) where boys went for lessons. As a female, she of course had no access there, but she would sit close by

with her relative uncle and pick up the rudiments of learning. At that time women were allowed to learn the household chores. Learning how to read and write for her was virtually impossible task. Gating married at the age of 12 she had heavy responsibilities of running a large household and taking care of her children. Rasasundari records how it was difficult and strenuous for her to manage her household duties even being engaged from dawn to midnight. In the then time there was a dogmatic belief or rather a patriarchal fabricated explanation (to make the women puppet to their hand) that if any woman started learning, she would have to face nightmarish widowhood. Thus female education was never encouraged in Antahpur. But Rasasundari Devi had an inflexible desire, indomitable spirit and irrevocable zeal and insatiable thirst for education avoiding the harsh red coiling eyes of prohibitive social system. She was a devout worshipper of **Dayamadhav**, all pervading Father of the universe and the very cream of kindness. Her fervour for spirituality and her strong will power never allowed her to surrender her 'self' so easily. In a heart-rending note she confesses that "My only regret was that I was not able to read and write because I was girl". She had strong determination possess over education specially for reading Chaitanya Bhagvata. Once in dream she dreamt of reading that religious scripture. One day she got a scope of stealing one illustrated sheet from that book (kept on the table by her husband) and hid it in the Khori (elevated bamboo platform) of the kitchen in order to save herself from societal gaze. Whenever she found leisure time amidst her pool of household duties she tried to memorise the letters, which she had come across during her childhoods, in a clandestine manner. But her continuous furtive persuasion of learning comparing the sheet and the stolen palm leaf on which her eldest son used to practice his hand writing, she acquired the ability to read the book. She also tried to verify her memorised words or alphabets with the speech of others in order to better adaptation. Yet she could not learn how to write because it was difficult for her being a woman, the daughter-in-law of the family to gather all the writing paraphernalia. But if we peruse the complete autobiography (AJ) we come to know that her younger son Kishori Lal supported her in course of writing. He sent her some papers, pen and ink and asked her to reply to him by herself. She secretly learns to read and write in near-impossible circumstances at the age of 25. This is possibly the only "dramatic" event in her life—a daring departure in an otherwise humdrum conventional domestic existence. She took writing as an instrument to procreate a creative sphere where no one can intrude in it. Her life is an inspiration and testimony of women will power to fight all odds and barriers in order to gain education and liberation. Rasasundari's story acquires a peculiarly rich historical resonance when we realise that the issue of women's education occupied a crucial place in changing social arrangements necessitated by reformulated patriarchies under colonial rule.

GRIHA-LAKHMI CONCEPT OR ANTAHPUR TRADITION

Amar Jiban, despite the author's lack of formal Education, is crafted with an ingenious hand. Rasasundari's choice of colloquial Bengali in narration allows for a blunt, forth-right representation of her everyday life. In what can only be termed a remarkably self-aware narrative choice, Rasasundari is cautious to juxtapose any statement that might be perceived as critical of her circumstances with qualifications that are either a comment on her own "ignorance" or "foolishness", or on human destiny and "divine intend". Amar Jiban valorises Rasasundari's narrated self as a model Griha Lakhmi and a paragon of feminine virtues. A multi-intentioned, polyvalent and polysomic contend lay blandly enfolded within seemingly innocent statements, or even within apparent contradictions. ".....a novel mix of rhetorical modes that would.....and recast it as an expression of prescribed Vaisnavite self-abnegation and humility as well as of proper womanly modesty and obedience" (Tanika Sarkar). Rasasundari herein echoes the voices of countless young brides in 19th century India, who found themselves abruptly thrust into sexual awakening—often with devastating consequences—at puberty, and along with it, adult responsibilities: from child, play to 'woman's work'. Amar Jiban is marked by an unsentimental narration of her daily tasks as the mistress of her household—gruelling physical labour involving long house in the confines of the kitchen, its heat and smoke as she cooked for a large household; Hours spent in the care of her ailing mother-in-law and in the service of the household daily; hours spent caring for her young children, born in quick succession. While her affinal household employed 8 (eight) domestic helps, domestic labour within the confines of the Andarmahal (inner sanctums) remained the responsibility of Rasasundari alone. In her own words, "I started doing all the work from the morning, which would end only at two in the night. I had no opportunity to rest in the middle". However her assertion that "I had everything in a spirit of duty" is certainly indicative of the emotional detachment. Rasasundari uphold the public opinion about Stree-shiksha (female education) vis-à-vis and the patriarchal fear of women's advancement over men. It is religion, deity Dayamadhav—the very cream of kindness came to her rescue from this vast pool of household works. Life became more challenging for her when she gave birth to 12 (twelve) children and the demands of the situation were so grave that she frequently had to go through without meals or rest. Rasasundari seemed to have humbly accepted the situation claiming "Blessed is my life, my birth. I am grateful for everything"—though there was an underlying irony in such humble assertion. She felt herself a 'caged Bird' having no way to get out of it. Yet the gnawing desire to read had not left Rasasundari and when she dreamt of reading Chaitanya Bhagvata, ineffable delight was flown through her mind. Amidst her arduous household duties, her inflexible determination to possess over the reading is noteworthy. The kitchen which until now had been the site of her imprisonment miraculously gets transformed into a sanctuary for her dangerous desires. In Tagore's 1917 piece titled **Chhaander Artha (The Meaning of Rhyme)**. Rabindranath waxes poetic on the Griha Lakhmi and describes the 'ineffable' grace of Griha Lakhmi, with her mark of vermilion and the bangle signifying marital ties



in her hand. Tagore's is an 'aesthetic' distaste for the sense of Andarmahal and fascination towards free 'beauty' is reflected there. We also get a glimpse of it in Amar Jiban.

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