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Rashsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* and Binodini Dasi's *My Story and My Life as an Actress*: A Comparative Study

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Rashsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* is said to be the first autobiography of a Bengali woman, probably the first full scale autobiography in the Bengali language. While Rashsundari was a respectable house wife of an affluent family, Binodini Dasi's autobiography- *My Story and My Life as an Actress* was significant because it came from a prostitute. They both stand for different strands of womanhood and the act of writing, that too an autobiography was a rebellious act. The paper tries to undertake a comparative study of both these works in terms of narrative strategies, and what their stories meant to unravel and how far they succeeded. Writing the self is a craft, and the paper tries to elucidate how both these women used that craft. Was it a compulsion of laying bare the heart or a strategy to make explicit certain ideas?

Lowly, ignorant and woman- they both were, as they themselves proclaimed. Whether it was just a humble proclamation in order to escape any kind of censure being what they were – Rashsundari Debi, an upper caste woman who had dared to read and write, and Binodini Dasi, an actress, a concubine; or they really felt being so, is for us to wonder. Being a lowly and ignorant woman was both the apparent cause of the self censorship they put upon themselves and also the weapon to guard them against judgments. Writing an autobiography was a courageous task to do for both of them. For Rashsundari, merely the task of reading or writing was a daring act as women of that time were not supposed to do so and to think of writing an autobiography was more of a kind of rebellion. Rebellious indeed also was the autobiography written by Binodini Dasi, a high class prostitute actress, whom the public loved to watch on stage but failed to respect in real life.

Rashsundari's autobiography, though it tells the seemingly insignificant and unremarkable life of a housewife, is epochal as it is the first autobiography by a Bengali woman and probably the first full scale autobiography in the Bengali language. Her mundane life was woven in a sacred pattern, and thus her autobiography as Tanika Sarkar writes, is an example of a modern woman's devotional quest. A woman's writing is supposed to reflect some gendered evidences like sentimentality and feminine sensibilities which is visible amply in Binodini's narrative but Rashsundari chooses to do away with them. While Binodini does talk about how she liked to be decked up and how passionate she was about theatre, Rashsundari only talks about her fears and anxieties, the only desire being to be able to read *Chaitanya Bhagbat*. There is no mention of her girly desires or her conjugal life or love. When she talks about her body which was indeed not so much of modesty, it was to tell how her body adapted to the demands of the situation. Her resistance of the imposed world, her sexuality is what makes her writing modern. There are no visual descriptions or sensuous dimensions, no evidence of a woman's speech. The reason may be obvious. Binodini was an actress for whom her sexuality was her chief identity beyond which she was not allowed to locate herself but Rashsundari was a *bhadramahila* for whom, to even talk about these things was banal. Moreover, married at a young age to probably

amuch older man in a strict household full of labours, she may not have even really experienced those sensations.

Rashsundari's is a non-dialogic, self-absorbed narrative (Sarkar 8). There are no characters in her story other than just a mention of names. Even when she mentions her husband, it is for narrative requirements as she is aware that people would like to know about him. But that too is the description of a public figure, a *zamindar* and not a husband or father. Perhaps so because the focus of her story is she- herself. It is herself that is being portrayed through an indirect mode, by telling what people talk about her and how she is received by them. Binodini's narrative is dialogic. It is addressed to a Mahashoy. An implicit struggle to get answers from him can be observed. She talks about the people in her lives whom she takes the effort to describe. The *hridoidebta* or the *mahashoy* are all given the shape of characters. This may also be a necessity. She owed her career to some people and while writing, many of them were still alive. She was a fallen woman in the eyes of the society and often in her eyes too, and writing an autobiography was already a transgressive act. She could not have done so without including them in her narrative and acknowledging their gratitude. She could not be as self-absorbed as Rashsundari was. Moreover she was a public woman; hence her story was bound to have the presence of others. But Rashsundari was a housewife of a respectable family. Other than the orthodoxy of the society there was nothing to inhibit her. She had no compulsion to mention others as it was her life- *amarjiban*(my life). An audacious position she had undertaken, the confidence can be attributed to her privileged state as well, of belonging to an affluent family.

Rashsundari uses the word *Bharatbarsha*, largest possible temporal and spatial frame to locate her life. "There is no local time, village time, family time. She gives herself nothing less than an entire subcontinent" Sarkar writes (9). A skillful strategy which shows she was not so an ignorant woman as she picturizes herself. She knows the public nature of her writing. A text becomes the space where she expresses what she wants to and keeping other things concealed. There is a brooding introspection of the pain, submission, obedience, fear, humility of her life. And there is no mention of contemporary happenings. She must be aware of them but chooses to only indulge herself. She makes it clear that it is about her life and not about writing. Binodini could not openly say, the way she would have wanted to voice her anguish and pose questions at certain people. Still the hints of betrayal by the very people whom she trusted and her vulnerable relationship with the Mahashoy cannot escape the notice of an observant reader. She, time and again speaks of her *bedona, jatana*, her helplessness but she does not dwell upon them in detail. Real tales of life have their own limitations.

Rashsundari coined the word *Jitakshara*, one who masters the word, through which she proclaimed her achievement as though it was a divine intention. Making her work seem a secular miracle was the only way for her to present her life to the outer world. Woven in the sacred pattern, to depict that her desire of reading and writing was supported by God's will and it was God who facilitated it, takes away the sting from her transgression. Recourse to spirituality can also be seen in Binodini's tale. Even she questions God time and gain and wants answers for why she was to suffer so much. Even Girish Chandra makes it a point to cite that though Binodini is a fallen woman, her life deserves to be written because she had been blessed by Ramakrishna Paramhansa hence she can be an example for others, that other such women too can redeem themselves, as if without that Binodini's plight and her struggle was of no account. But as far as Binodini is concerned, for her it was more a matter of crisis of faith, so when the belief that

it was God's will that made everything happen she resorts to the idea of fate. It was fate that failed her. Rashsundari has used divinity in a more skillful way. While she says she is all for what God wills without complaint, she does not fail to show that what God has willed has not been always good.

The manipulation of various modes in Rashsundari's narrative is more skillful and confessional. The autonomy of her mind can be easily seen as she has always been good with secrets. Her fears and anxieties were known only to her, even her desire to read. Her decisions and opinions were her own. Though as a child she was always nervous and fearful. Even after marriage she did not have much confidence, even to talk to her younger sisters-in-law, but slowly as her status in the household consolidated, her confidence improved. Her clandestine act of reading and slowly opening up to the women of neighborhood and their collective act of singing which were denied to upper caste respected women shows her capacity for opposition. She was an individuated self. As Virginia Woolf calls it, her depiction of self as a good wife is a case of 'special pleading' through which she rebuts the orthodox fears about educating women. Though all her life she was in veil, the act of unveiling in public through her writing makes it clear that the conventions that she upheld all her life, trying to please everyone, and being forever involved in labour, she was not very happy with it. She lost her childhood to it, and though she had control over the household she did not have what Woolf calls 'a room of one's own'. She did not have a private space and no time for leisure. There was no place where she could learn privately how to read and write and publically she could not do so, she had to resort to tearing page from *Chaitanyabhagbat*. In subdued tone and through the mask of narrating how good a wife she was, she does speak of the oppression that lies beneath it. She says her in-laws loved her but the same people did not allow her to nurse her mother when she was dying, as her work was indispensable. Thus a silent grudge or a timid revolt through a masked tone against the codes of the society can be smelled. But apart from the emphasis on education she does not talk of other emancipatory ideals for women, as perhaps she herself was not that enlightened on such issues as she too, like other women had internalized those norms that made for a good wife, though she may have come to detest them later.

As a contrast to Rashsundari, Binodini was since childhood a high spirited and enthusiastic girl. But her decisions and opinions were largely shaped by others. Initially she got the wider knowledge through the talks of Girish Chandra Ghosh and others. Even later they were the ones who decided for her. Her *abhiman*, nevertheless was hurt many a time when her wish was not fulfilled but she never had the courage to question them openly. She bore the brunt silently. And she could be easily persuaded by flattering her vanity. Perhaps her condition did not allow her to do so, as she had to be some one or the other's *ashrita*. Her skills were made use of and she was denied any chance to own control or power in the theatre. Like Rashsundari she too was pampered because her service was indispensable but at the decisive moments she was betrayed. She was denied any agency in her life. The household that overburdened Rashsundari was a dream for women like Binodini. She gets a house but only when she agrees to leave the world, the world of theatre and even in that house her actress self haunted her. What she was, also affected the life of her daughter. But she had what Rashsundari did not. She had some taste of fame, of economic independence, and a taste of the world. She had a share of passionate love. She could embody both divinity and eroticism in her life but for Rashsundari there was no place for eroticism. She could speak of her *hridaydebata* who loved her and pined for unlike the *karta* of Rashsundari's life. But they both refrain from taking their name in the narrative. The

same society that inflicted Binodini in the name of honour in her outer world, also made Rashundari slog in her house within the four walls. She too looked for Hari when answers failed her as Rashundari looked for *Dayamadhav* in times of distress.

It was only as the author that they both commanded control of their lives. The authorial privilege allowed Rashundari to double speak and thus surface messages got confused. They both shared an ambiguous complex relation with the *adhikari*, the *adhikari* of the theatre of life, God, in Rashundari's case and the *adhikari* of theatre in Binodini's case. Rashundari tries to deconstruct the glory of good wife and household chores through her narrative while Binodini wants to tell her story of anguish to the world to show the hypocrisy of the stage and the world. They both in their own way rebel through their writings. Rashundari makes the underlying oppression of seemingly normal and virtuous life of a housewife manifest and Binodini openly says that those who do not sympathize with her need not read her work. It is for them who can understand her.

Though Rashundari did not have to face any hostility from her people, and it was easier for her to write as she belonged to an affluent family. But for Binodini, continuing her passion with respect was an uphill task, still she had to give up her passion for respect which she did not fully get and writing an autobiography for her was not that easy as it could have put many influential people to unease. Yet she went on and ended up writing about her life as well, though she was asked by her mentor to only write about her life on stage, that too mainly to keep her busy. Nevertheless, they both deserve a salute for their ambitious and courageous effort to take charge of their lives, to decide how they would like to be remembered through their narrative and open their lives up for the public view.

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