

WRITING SELF, DOCUMENTING RESISTANCE : A STUDY OF RASSUNDARI DEVI'S *AMAR JIBAN*

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Abstract

*The genre of autobiography writing can be a significant device to conceive and paint an image of the self. While documenting one's own life narrative, autobiographies also record the time and space in which the text is located. While archiving the society and its various events, an autobiography not only highlights the past but also forms a sense of association with the time in which the writer/reader is located. Moreover, because of the shifting nature of the text, it remains relevant to the time that is yet to come. Autobiographies not only reveal the past while envisioning them in the present, but they also guide the reader and the society towards a tomorrow that may learn from the past. The paper will examine Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amar Jiban* while exploring some of these issues.*

Keywords: *Autobiography, Self, Identity, Past, Memory, Agency*

Can one define one's life through writing? What does a text do? Can words sum up one's life? One may think about these questions and find it difficult to arrive at a particular conclusion. Can one represent 'self' through writing? How do we conceive the idea of self? One may say that self is consciousness. As Descartes in *Discourses on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1641) says in Latin "Cogito, ergo sum" translated into English as "I think, therefore I am". According to Descartes, one has to be aware of the existence of the 'self' to visualize a thought. The genre of life writing oscillates between imagination and facts. Traditionally life writing or autobiography, in particular, was perceived as a form to document historical facts and events. The present paper shall explore the genre of autobiography within the larger canon of life writing. Writing can be a tool, method, avenue as well as source to locate the historicity of place, time, and culture. Georges Gusdorf extends Descartes' point in his essay 'Condition and limits of Autobiography' (1956) and argues that autobiography writing is not a possibility in a cultural space where the consciousness of self does not exist (30). This paper will engage with the question of whether Life-writing can be an avenue to peep into the dominion of the present by writing about the past? Is it possible to further address the future by re-imagining the past through life-writings? What is the self? Examples will be drawn from Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*. A part of the paper will explore the domestic space as a site of writing as well as resistance.

Life-writing provides first-hand narratives of individuals and their relationship with society, the past, and culture in general. Life writings project a thematic concern for 'life' or 'self'. The term 'Life-Writing' is broadly applied to all written documentation of memories. This includes biographies, memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, personal essays, blogs, a collection of letters etc. One writes about one's life to share one's thoughts and experiences with people in general. Life Writing is the ever-evolving device to document one's account and history. It can be a tool to locate one's voice. Moreover,

it can be an apparatus to question the hegemonic practices and connect the present with the past and future simultaneously in its resistance. Susan Green in the essay *Genre: Life Writing* writes: “Life writing is the shaping and constructing of life... generating effects of reality and truth. Life writing is a site of struggle in the representation of life and self, and is empowering because it enacts the authority to broaden and disrupt the traditional generic frames of text” (50).

As far as the discourse of the self is concerned, one could argue that the self is something that is always in the process of being. Like a text, it is multiple and shifting. Self cannot be confined to a particular time or space. Self as a text cannot be confined to one author and it cannot be singular as lives are not lived in isolation. One’s life often gets entangled with the lives of others too. The question which becomes rather important is how much an author compromises while documenting the self. Can the nature of ‘self’ change when it is projected for the public reception as well as consumption? Being plural in its nature, the self remains incoherent. Achieving a sense of coherence while writing one’s life account can be a desire which many writers/individuals may aspire for. However, one needs to understand that the dominion of life writing is incomplete without having to discuss memory and its pertinent role in remembering the past and in the act of remembering, it is important to talk about forgetting too. Why do we choose to forget certain days and moments of our life? Since there may not be any recollection of certain events, does this imply that those moments do not exist? Is memory an authentic device of recollection? Just life self, memory too can be fragmented. As far as the genre of autobiography is concerned, it can be an effective medium to foreground the existence of the subject as well as the relationship the subject shares with the past. Moreover, writing about the self can be a way to document everyday experiences. Rassundari in *Amar Jiban* (1876) mentions the domesticity of everyday life from cooking, cleaning, and supervising to worshipping the deity of the house. Gunthorunn Gudmundsdottir in his work *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (2003) mentions that “autobiography is inherently the genre of memory” (11). In the first chapter of the book titled “Memory and the Autobiographical Process: Lillian Hellman, Georges Perec, and Paul Auster”, Gudmundsdottir mentions that autobiography is about recollecting the past and the act of recollection is equivalent to an investigation. The author investigates the plethora of memories as well as how to arrange and write memories. Moreover, the author needs to find a balance between private and public memory and the relationship of the same with history (Ibid 12-13). As far as memory and the act of forgetting are concerned, Virginia Woolf in her work ‘A Sketch of the Past’ mentions that as much as we remember, there are things that we do not remember and they are as significant or maybe they are more important (69). What happens to the project of writing the self when it doesn’t include the days that the writer has completely forgotten about, the days that do not find any reference anywhere. We are what we are by the act of remembering certain events of our life that convey a sense of historicity to our existence. Is existence, then, a conscious act to weave a particular narrative that the person wants to remember? Furthermore, when one remembers a particular event of the past than does it belong to the past alone or does it have an impact on our present too? Is present and what we make of our present a continuation of our past or does the past exist as an independent separate entity. If our present is an extension of our past then the edges and borders, where these two worlds meet, might be difficult to trace.

Amar Jiban: An Account of All Times

Dinesh Chandra Sen in his introduction to Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* translated by Enakshi Chatterjee (1999) writes that while the autobiography represents the author but it is as much a documentation of the life of Hindu women belonging to the 19th century. When one speaks of oneself then at that moment one also records the society of the time (11). *Amar Jiban* is essentially an account of Rassundari's struggle with reading and writing. The condition of women was quite deplorable in the 19th century. Women were not encouraged to educate themselves and if attempted then it was considered to be a matter of shame. Rassundari recounts that she used to tremble with fear all the time. She could not speak up against oppression as there was a normalization of coercion. Throughout part one of her autobiography, Rassundari laments that she was like a caged bird. She wanted to set herself free but one could not think of defying the societal norms in those days. Being a woman, one had to be passive and timid. She says: "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" (37).

Tanika Sarkar in her translation of *Amar Jiban* titled *Words to Win- The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography* (1999) theorizes the struggle Rassundari had to go through. Sarkar writes that in the 19th century, orthodox Hindus did not want their women to get an education as there was a common belief that was quite prevalent in the society that women who received education were destined to be widowed. The efforts made by the Christian missionaries and Indian reformers toward the education of women led to a huge conflict within society. Education was considered to be a dominion of men. While the Hindu society wanted to incarcerate women through various constructs, Rassundari subverts the regressive power structure by teaching herself to read and write (3). Sarkar while talking about the genre of autobiography highlights the boundaries that exist between the word and the world. Words can be a way to create the world. "It was through writing a book that the life that she wanted to express, could take on life" (Ibid 10). In the first composition of her autobiography, Rassundari writes that she learnt many letters by observing the boys who would scratch out the alphabets on the ground and afterwards, the boys would loudly recite the letters (Ibid 143). This covert way of learning was an act of transgression. This was also a way to question the circulation of falsified notions around the discourse of women and education. While *Amar Jiban* is an account of power relations, it is also a reality that not much has changed when it comes to the issue of the liberation of women and their agency. The institution of patriarchy attempts to hegemonise the female body and its movement even now.

Rassundari in her autobiography problematizes the discourse of knowledge and its dissemination in society. Knowledge, which could be equated with power, was considered to be a male-centric sphere. Women were both encouraged and expected to confine themselves within the boundaries of domesticity. Women were treated as commodities. Women and the question of movement without any sense of restriction and fear is still an impossibility in many cultures and societies. Rassundari Devi was married off at the age of fourteen. This came as a shock to Devi as she never thought that she would have to leave her home to go to a new house with strangers. The transition of such a nature can be quite traumatic for a child who is just fourteen years old. Devi writes, "the bird was thrust behind the cage, the fish fell into the net...people have fun, taming birds in a cage" (Ibid 154). Moreover, this view was quite common that

1 Rassundari Devi (1810-1890)

women are meant for domestic chores. Women were supposed to be hardworking as well as meek, someone who doesn't raise any questions. This idea that women should be passive and submissive is a part of our social reality even now. Women were to do all the household work while having to keep their faces covered at all times (Ibid 160). Devi would work from morning to evening within the borders of her husband's house to make sure everyone is pleased. With eleven children to look after, there would hardly be any time left for Devi to do anything else. Kathy Mezei in her article titled 'Domestic Space and the Idea of Home in Auto/biographical Practices' mentions that ample research has been done on public space within Social Sciences, however, private spaces barely get any attention, even though such spaces play a pertinent role in shaping the everyday life (81). Mezei goes on to argue that domestic spaces can be a medium to investigate the self and subjectivity (Ibid 83). Moreover, the domesticity of objects and rooms leads to the 'double-voiced position of the self' that narrates the past while writing in the present (Ibid 90).

While personal spaces are overlooked by researchers, often fear is used as a device of control to restrict women within the domestic sphere. Rules are laid down and if you don't listen and follow the instructions then you must pay the price. You must be subjected to some kind of penalty for breaking the norm. Fear, by those who are in positions of power, is used, to manipulate different aspects of society. Devi writes that if she had to go somewhere to be a part of an occasion or a ceremony then she was expected to be back within a few days. She remarks, "I was like a prisoner let out on parole" (Ibid 167). Overcoming all hurdles, Rassundari does manage to break away from the cage to a great extent to materialize her dreams and desires. Through perseverance and strong will, she manages to learn to recognize letters but fear does not leave her. Even in her attempt to acquire, there was an inherent fear of performing something wrong, and this is exactly how a regressive power structure functions. Any act of defiance is ridiculed by such a structure. One could deduce that *Amar Jiban* primarily deals with the representation of women in the public domain. The text does manage to form a thread of connection between past as well as present (indicating now as well as the time when the book was published) and future too because the position of the reader keeps changing. Besides, the question of women and their non-restrictive movement in society remains a big question mark. The institution of patriarchy continues to thrive across countries as well as cities, normalizing oppression in the name of customs and traditions. *Amar Jiban* in its present location acts as a connecting link between the past and the future by not only archiving the everyday experience of a woman in a phallogocentric set-up but also by conveying the importance of resistance if we are to change the dominant narratives of society. One has to subvert to bring about a change.

Amar Jiban is not just a reflection of the time and life that has long gone by but it is as much about the present social structure which is full of disparities. Moreover, the autobiography conveys a route to map the fight against the oppressive parochial systems. To conclude, one could remark that life-writings attempt to project narratives and histories which are closer to reality. The sole aim of writing about one's life is not just to write about one's life but to represent the times in which both the writer and the text are located. Since life/self is always in the process of being and thus is the nature of a text. A text belongs not only to the past or present but can also provide a lens to peep into the future. Furthermore, as Gusdorf mentions that autobiography is never a finished product or a complete image because human life is always a doing, a making. While conversing with oneself, an author does not give a final meaning to life but attempts to understand and embrace the journey of one's being and existence (Ibid 47).

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