

WORDS TO WIN

The Making of *Amar Jiban*: A Modern
Autobiography

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kali for women



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A Modern Autobiography

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Introduction

(On getting married) "I went straight into my mother's arms," crying, "Mother, why did you give me away to a stranger?"

(After marriage) "My day would begin at dawn and I worked till two at night... I was fourteen years old... I longed to read books. But I was unlucky, those days women were not allowed to read."

(Learning to read at twenty five) "It was as if the Great Lord himself taught me how to read. If I didn't know even that much, I would have had to depend on others..."

(Looking back on her youth) "In the meantime the Great Lord had decked my body out just the way a boat is fitted out... How strange it all was: so many things came out of my body, yet I knew nothing of their causes."



These are some important words and themes from *Amar Jiban*, the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman, and very probably, the first full-scale autobiography in the Bengali language. Her writing and her life stand in a peculiarly significant relationship to each other, since the author, Rashsundari Debi, a housewife from an upper caste, landed family in East Bengal (now in Bangladesh), possessed none of the criteria that presumably render a woman's life noteworthy.

It was, on the whole, an uneventful, unremarkable life. Rashsundari was born around 1809 in the village of Potajia in Pabna district. When she was twelve, she was married off to

Sitanath Ray, a prosperous landlord from Ramdia village in Faridpur. From the age of fourteen, she began to look after the entire household and she also gave birth to twelve children in fairly rapid succession. When she was twenty-five, however, Rashsundari made a daring departure. She secretly taught herself to read. Over time, she read through all the religious manuscripts at her home. Later, she taught herself to write.

Rashsundari was widowed when she was fifty-nine, and the next year, in 1868, she finished the first version of her autobiography.¹ She added a second part and a new version came out in 1897 when she was eighty-eight. We do not have any records of sales proceeds but it is significant that she was confident enough to go in for a second edition. It carried a preface by the well known literary figure, Jyotirindranath Tagore, elder brother to Rabindranath. Such propitious beginnings notwithstanding, we do not find any mention of her in the standard histories of literature,² nor is her date of death recorded anywhere.³ *Amar Jiban* (henceforward *AJ*) was her single literary effort.⁴

¹ She writes, and it is usually thought, that her autobiography was published in the same year. Ghulam Murshid, however, thinks that it was published in 1875. The earliest edition that I have been able to locate in the India Office Library also bears that date. In her text, she certainly says that she finished writing the first part in 1868. See Murshid, *Rashsundari Theke Rokeya: Nari Pragatir Eksho Bacchar*, Bangla Academy Press, Dacca, 1993, p. 41.

² See for instance, S.C. Sengupta, ed, *Sansad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, 1975, p. 487, which has a short note on Rashsundari but does not provide a date of death; or, Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vols 1 and 2, Eastern Publishers, Calcutta, 1965 and 1970.

³ There is a sparse mention in a more recent Biographical Dictionary. Apart from a reference to her book, the only other fact it offers about her is that her son was Kishorilal Sarkar. This, presumably, was the High Court lawyer, a man, it seems, of some importance. Subodhchandra Sengupta, ed, *Sansad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, 1976, p. 487.

⁴ The enlarged edition came out in 1897. A third edition followed in 1906 and a fourth one appeared in 1956, with an introduction by the famous historian, Dineshchandra Sen. For the translation, I have used a reprint of the second edition that was published in the *Atmakatha* series, by Ananya Publishers, Calcutta, 1981. I have also translated the Introduction by Jyotirindranath Tagore which comes in with the second edition.

Only one event of an exceptional kind had interrupted the even, quiet rhythms of a conventional domestic existence. Orthodox Hindus of those times kept their women illiterate, since there was a firm belief that the educated woman was destined to be widowed. In Rashsundari's own family, feelings ran so high against women's education that she would not so much as glance at a piece of paper lest she be accused of knowing how to read. The first tentative efforts by Christian missionaries and Indian reformers to educate women had produced a sort of an orthodox backlash against the move, and had hardened Hindu opinion. The meek and submissive housewife understood perfectly well that her secret effort went drastically against the grain of familial and social codes. This one act of disobedience, then, partially deconstructs the good wife — a script that Rashsundari otherwise followed with admirable success all her life.

Why did she, on her own, and in great trepidation, make this deeply transgressive departure? And what bearing does this desire and this achievement have on the fact that Rashsundari was the first Bengali person to write out her own life, to recreate, or, indeed, to invent it through the autobiographical act, and thereby gather it closely to herself and possess it more fully? What were the resources available to her that could have produced this desire and what are the new possibilities that we can read into women's lives and writings from the presence of this desire?

Rashsundari says that it was an inexplicable, yet irrepressible urge to read a particular sacred text that made her struggle in secret to learn to read. That book was *Chaitanya Bhagabat* (henceforward *CB*),⁵ the first Bengali biography of Chaitanya, the Krishna-maddened saint of medieval Bengal, who had

⁵ According to Sukumar Sen, the biography was completed around 1541-42. Bimanbihari Majumdar, however, is of the opinion that it was around 1548. See Asit Bandyopadhyaya, *Bangla Sahityer Itibritta*, Volume 11, 3rd edition, Modern Book Agency, Calcutta, 1983, pp 348-50. Also Binanbihari Majumdar, *Shri Chaitanya Chariter Upadan*, Calcutta University Press, Calcutta, 1959, Chapter I.

promised salvation to the wretched, the low caste, the women — categories excluded by brahmanical orthodoxy from higher spiritual aspirations and learning. She went on to read other manuscripts that dealt with the lives of Chaitanya and his beloved deity, Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver of Creation. Her reading, then, had a lot to do with lives saintly and lives divine. When she wrote, she did so with a covert design and she audaciously structured her very mundane life story on a sacred pattern: she was the chosen instrument of God, who worked a miracle on her, the fruit of which was her wondrous mastery over the written word. As far I can see, it was she who had coined that magnificent word with which she proclaimed her own achievement: *jitakshara*, or one who has mastered the word. *AJ* was proof of the miracle, just as the miraculous events of saints' lives are evidence of divine intention. Her life was meant to be read as if it was enclosed within a divine purpose, as almost an extension of God's own life. It was as if the two lives — God's and the devotee's — were intertwined within a single narrative frame, interanimating each other. In fact, the last sections of her autobiography describe, without any apparent sense of incongruity, not events from her own life, but from the lives of Krishna and Chaitanya.

Rashsundari read from a fairly wide corpus of late medieval Bengali devotional (*bhakti*) texts. Her reflections drew upon terms that have long and multiple lineages within Hindu religious discourses. Unless we refer often and in some detail to this thick web of intertextuality, *AJ* would make only limited and local sense.

Again, even though the history of her own times and place seems remarkably absent within the text, the book itself. It was a material product created by a woman, composed in the new Bengali prose, and printed for a nineteenth century readership that was keenly interested in the life and self-reflections of an ordinary woman who belonged crucially to our first modern century. We need to explore the insertion of the large historical processes into the life and into the book,

even though Rashsundari herself showed no overt interest in them.

II

I was interested in *AJ* not only because it initiates the autobiographical genre in Bengali, or because it is an early example of a woman's writing in that language, but also because *AJ* is a rare and early example of a modern woman's devotional quest that is articulated in her own words. My interest was sharpened as I came to realise how different the text had turned out to be from what I had expected from a woman's autobiography, a woman's writing, a woman's *bhakti*.

It would be simple-minded to posit a straight connection between female subjectivity and female writing, to assume that the latter reflects the former in some direct, unmediated way. In fact, for the writing woman of her generation of the first-educated, the act of writing itself would have reconstituted her subjectivity in radically new ways. Yet, a woman's writing is far too easily folded back into the cultural world that it comes out of. Or, even more problematically, it is connected to her body — its phallic lack, its rhythms, pulsations, urges — as if it is the woman who alone has a body, or rather, her body is all that she has.⁶ *AJ* seemed to be strenuously resisting the implications of both, as if through her writing, Rashsundari is declaring her emancipation from all the resources that have been conventionally allotted to her. Her resistance to her inherited and imposed world lies in her act of writing in more ways than one. In this sense, *AJ* is a very early text of modernity.

We find very little by way of the direct speech acts of the woman, or speech acts shaped entirely by female experiences: hardly any proverbs, riddles, tales, pungent or earthy idioms,

⁶ On such expectations from women's subjectivity and its literary expression, see Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", in Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, London, 1986.

through which women articulate their sense of the world.⁷ Her writing is quite removed from everyday, colloquial forms — not only in the syntax and in grammatical constructions, but also in the very nature of the prose that she uses. It is not, in any noticeable way, gender marked.

It could be possible that one of her highly educated sons had brushed up the prose, or had edited the text. Yet, the market for the book would, if anything, have demanded some more evidence of the woman's speech, a specific, gendered writing. It is unlikely that the female writing traces would have been eradicated so thoroughly in any intelligent editing. Also, as we shall see, other women chose a similar mode of articulation, privileging the discursive, the reflexive, rather than the descriptive or the entirely emotional. They chose to do so even when the market would have preferred more self-evidently different and feminine modes. We have an example of such expectation of 'authentic' feminine writing in Rabindranath Tagore's short story, *Nashtaneer*. Here the woman first tries to emulate her literary brother-in-law's themes and ways of writing. Frustrated by the sterile mimicry, she then turns to her own rural past, observed custom, festivities, work, and she starts describing them in exactly the same words that she recalls them with. That is immediately a hit with publishers as an authentic example of women's writing. In Satyajit Ray's filmic rendering of the story, her writing is dissolved in the act of her visual recalling, her hand merely traces out the pictures that her eye of memory conjures

⁷ Proverbs, especially, were a domain where women would have given a dominant shape to the cultural production. It is believed that if lullabies — another arena of female orality and creativity — expressed the tender and softer aspects of female subjectivity, proverbs reflected the hard contempt, the angry satire with which they interpreted the world and its patriarchal order. So closely were women associated with the making and use of proverbs that the first book written for their education — Gourmohan Vidyalkar's *Strishikshavishayak*, written about 1822 — used about thirty five of them in the first chapter. See Sushil Kumar De, *Bangla Praband: Chhara O Chalti Katha*, Calcutta, 1947.

up. Writing is at no distance from visual or emotional experiences, it is merely a deposit left by those.⁸

It is remarkable that Rashsundari, and several of her contemporaries resist such expectations. It is true that very often they break into a highly emotionalised form of articulation which is integrated into the discursive. That, however, remained a characteristic of all modern Bengali prose, the boundaries between the emotional and the discursive being no more sharply drawn in male writings. It could be that with this new prose, that had been developed sufficiently to bear the weight of many different kinds of writing only in the first two or three decades of this century, women did not start writing too long after men had done so. There are, therefore, not yet any congealed, masculine ways of writing which would be inaccessible to the ways women would tend to write.⁹ Another reason was that the new prose was quite fluid and not very rigidly structured in terms of syntax or patterns of articulation. There was an absence

⁸ *Nashtaneer*, 1901. See *Galpaguchha*, Vishwabharati Publications, Calcutta, 1994, pp 385-420. Ray's film that is based on that story is called *Charulata* and was made in 1963.

⁹ Christian missionaries began to translate their religious literature in Bengali and their needs of conversion gave an impetus to the development of vernacular prose, for which they utilised the services of pandits. In the first decade of the 19th century, men like Ramram Basu and Mrityunjay Vidyalankar wrote the first prose textbooks, but it was Rammohun Roy's translations of sacred texts in the second decade that brought Bengali prose into a usable and acceptable shape. Around the same time, the first Bengali newspapers, brought out under missionary auspices as well as under Rammohun's editorship, refined the prose even further. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's writings in the 1850s were still struggling with the problem of introducing a proper punctuation system into the prose. The first memorable work of fiction came out in 1862 : Tekchand Thakur's *Hutom Penchar Naksha*, which, however, used an outrageously earthy and colloquial form. Bankimchandra, who forced the prose into a chaste, more Sanskritised direction, remained the more dominant influence for serious fiction and discursive writings, while the *Hutomi* language got relegated more to the domain of farces and of pulp literature. See Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahitya Itihas*, Sahitya Akademi, Calcutta, 1965, pp. 160-72. Women's prose writings did not really lag behind. Kailashbashini's *Hindu Mahilaganer Heenabastha* appeared in 1863.

of very strict grammatical controls and regulations that made Sanskrit pandits extremely contemptuous of it. Even the great novelist and essayist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay could not escape their censure. The flexible prose structure, then, was hospitable to the writings of those who had only recently been educated and who had had little experience in handling grammatical and construction rules in their own writing. That might be the reason why, among the genres to flower with the founding of the prose and the print from the early decades of the century, we find popular tracts, fiction and farces that were brought out by the cheap, pulp publishers of Battala in North Calcutta.¹⁰

The woman is generally supposed to be more sensitive to the concrete and the sensuous dimensions of everyday life, to the emotional complications of relationships rather than to abstract and cerebral matters. Rashsundari's book, however, is astonishingly bare of visual or sensuous content. There are few descriptions of exterior landscapes, of domestic interiors. There is no impression of taste, sound or smell. The objects she handled, the spaces she passed through, the faces she saw, bear no individual features in her narrative. The great rivers and waterways of Pabna and Faridpur — Padma, Brahmaputra, Ariyal Khan — are condensed into the single metaphor of a boat journey through the rivers of life. They also shape a dream sequence where her dead son comes to meet her on a tiny boat across the great, melancholy expanses of a river. The landscapes reflect her moods, her thoughts. Nature is merely a mirror to her interior states. Events that took place around her are similarly condensed. There is a brief poem on an epidemic fever that was raging at her village in Faridpur, but there is little about anything else that did not directly touch herself.

AJ is a curiously self-absorbed, non-dialogic narrative. Other people appear simply to make a specific point about her and

¹⁰ See Sukumar Sen, *Battalar Chhapa O Chhabi*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1984. Also, Bireswar Bandyopadhyay, *Heto Bai Heto Chhara*, Calcutta, 1984.

then they disappear. They do not have an independent life within the text, nor do they live out relationships with one another. The husband, who had been given a few perfunctory references in the main body of the book, was granted a separate, brief section at the end, because, she said, people would want to know about him. A curiously impersonal obituary was, therefore, appended, for narrative requirements, not because she wanted to talk about him. Even that section concludes with an account of a triumph of her own writing skills.

She turned the narrative focus intensely upon herself, first of all, by abstracting herself from her lived world. "I came to Bharatbarsha and I have spent a long time here. This body of mine, this mind, this life itself, have taken several different forms." She lived out her life in two villages. They are, however, absent, except as mere names. Nor are there more, intimate, familiar locales — the sub-division, the district or even the province. Her time scale is oddly precise. She deviated from popular, rural ways of patterning time and memory: pinning down a personal event by its contiguity with a natural one like a flood or a famine, or by referring to an event of local or family importance. There is no local time, village time, family time. She gives herself nothing less than a whole subcontinent and almost an entire century to live in.

In their larger, historical-geographical dimensions, these landmarks were remote to her lived life. Yet, evidently, they were meaningful to the design of her self-created, narrated life. They had an aesthetic purpose in conferring a rhythm to the movement of her life. At the time that she was writing, a united Indian empire had emerged, renewed and revamped after the 1857 uprising. Bharatbarsha, then, was the effect of a new political reality. The name also occurs in *Chaitanya Bhagabat*. The Vaishnavite pilgrimage circuit, spreading from Nabadwip in Bengal to Puri in Orissa — which is a gateway to the south — to Mathura-Vrindaban in the north and Dwarka in the west, gave Vaishnavs a sense of a large, subcontinental sacred geography. Again, as the book was being written, the nineteenth century had self-consciously separated itself out from an

undifferentiated mass of time, a recurrent replay of identical time-cycles. It had come to see itself as the site of a new and unique history, which gave time a direction, a teleology.

Rashsundari needed this very large background to abstract herself from her actual empirical life. She transcended its narrow limits, its inability to intersect with grand historical narratives, by giving herself the largest possible temporal and spatial frames that she could relate to. Her life thus acquired an adequate site where a great divine purpose could unfold.

Autobiography, as a genre, most obviously confuses the boundaries between the word and the world, deluding us that it is the actual life we are reading, and not a text. I found that *AJ* defeated the expectation continuously. In very many ways, its textuality is underlined by the distance it sets up between Rashsundari's lived experiences and her narrative preoccupations. It was through writing a book that the life that she wanted to express, could take on life. I have written about the text alone for I am not the biographer of Rashsundari, even assuming that it is possible to recover more facts about her life. The contexts and lineages that I have sought to gather, therefore, relate to the book and not to the life.

Bakhtin considers a fundamental tension as the constitutive principle of autobiographical writing: "... I must become *another* in relation to myself — to myself as living *this*, my own life in this axiological world — and this *other* must take up an essentially founded axiological position outside myself."¹¹ The aporia which is induced by this necessary othering of the self in order to narrativise it and render it into an aesthetic product in an inter-subjective situation, does not paralyse *AJ*. On the contrary, Rashsundari seems to have founded a theological-narrative stance that handles the paradox as a constitutive

¹¹ M. Bakhtin, in Michael Holquist and Vladimir Lipunov, eds, *Art and Answerability*, trans, Lipunov and Austin ; University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 113. For a discussion of the theme of autobiographical writing in Bakhtin, see Uday Kumar, "Bakhtin and Questions of Autobiographical Consummation", unpublished article. I am grateful to him for letting me look at his paper.

principle of her text. She underlines the distance and the difference between the writing self and the written self, pointing out the temporal gulf, the developmental process that intervenes and ruptures the unity of the two. The distancing, however, leads to no secure and final objective truth. Indeed, she is always at pains to insist on the impossibility of gaining a decisive purchase and hold on the meaning of her entire life. This is, as we shall see later, partly a function of her being a woman who necessarily lacks power and control over her life. It is also the hierarchical difference between God and the human devotee.

III

AJ is an indifferently written but superbly crafted text. The prose is not remarkable, sliced up, as it is, into short, somewhat jagged or trembling sentences which often sound like mild whining. The vocabulary is rarely extensive or very varied, a limited repertoire of words gets used insistently over large stretches of passages. Verse colophons are based on conventional devotional codes. As I have said before, people, landscapes and objects are sparsely drawn and do not come to life, except very rarely. What absorbs the author are her own states of mind, and her own life events are but a trigger to reflections on these. The text wallows in a kind of brooding introspection which, however, revolves round a fixed repertoire: pain, submission, obedience, fear, humility.

Yet, that is not all. Conventional devotional statements sometimes use a mix of metaphors or codes that are strikingly individual. They not only depart from pre-established patterns, but also subtly undo them. There are flashes of acute observations, descriptions that are deeply, though briefly evocative, reflections that pierce the drab, ponderous, pious prose with acid comments. Entirely unsuspected and jarring moods, emotions and reactions flash across the flow of the narrative, that relieve the prose and also deconstruct the dominant message and purpose. The disconcerting insertions are not accidental, spontaneous, an uncontrollable bursting through

of the repressed, the silenced. They are carefully calibrated and highly controlled strategies that are worked deliberately into the text for maximum effect: the effects, again, are subtly framed so that the overt and explicit message sets up a strong but unstated tension with the occasional, the unexpected. Rashsundari proceeds through a magnificently controlled doublespeak that is facilitated by certain typically Vaishnav expressive conventions which I have discussed later on.

Given these swift and insidious shifts in moods and language, I thought it best to follow the prose as closely as possible in my translation, allowing the impression of ponderousness and listlessness to come through fully so that the other, less typical parts may stand up all the more vividly. In other words, I do not propose to make the translation more pleasurable reading than the text itself, to tone up the drabness, to rectify the repetitions.

Of course, translations cannot be very literal. Particularly so, when the translation is in English, a language that occupies a very remote linguistic and conventional field from the original in Bengali. There are structured differences between one language and the other that cannot be naturalised in the translation. Bengali has a vast vocabulary, with a very large range of synonyms for most of our significant nouns and adjectives. Verbs, on the other hand, are limited in comparison with English ones.¹² When one word is preferred in the text against all others, it is because of its sound and meaning effects that will correspond most closely to the signified, for the particular resonances that sound and meaning will carry, and also for its allusive qualities, especially literary ones — when this word is placed in a particular arrangement. I have already talked about the fact that Bengali sentences are not as firmly anchored in a particular linear structure as they are in English. The relatively more loose and open-ended syntax opens up a field of

¹² I am grateful to P.K. Datta for pointing out the specific difference between verb and noun/adjective usages.

considerable play on words. Such fluidity and structural variations had to be sacrificed in the translation, since they would sound unnecessarily idiosyncratic and experimental in English. But I have not interfered with the arrangement of paragraphs or the size of sentences, keeping them very long or very short, according to the original. That fidelity, however, was not possible with the verses, and I could not replicate the original rhyming or metrical patterns. I have also tried to preserve the repetitiveness by using the same English words in translation over and over again.

The autobiography, as we have seen, came out in two parts. The first part has been translated in almost its entirety, but only sections from the second part have been retained in translation. The other sections were particularly unreadable, enormously repetitive and there is very little about Rashsundari's own self. Some very typical samples have been translated, and so have those parts that seem to be very important to her self-reflections. I have also translated Jyotirindranath's Preface to the second edition, since I have frequently referred to it in my text.

I have had no previous experience with translating. Nonetheless, I felt that I needed to do the translation myself to acquire some intimacy with the text before I wrote about it. I have said that it is not a particularly pleasurable text to read. It is the constraints that drew me so strongly towards it. The compulsive yet hesitant moves towards self-disclosure and self-creation that this pious, modest and obedient housewife is engaged in are, I find, a profoundly modern possibility. They are even more a sign of our very distinctive and peculiar modernity where the good and humble woman so badly needed a space of her own, as well as a space in public view. The need troubled and touched me.

IV

Recently, Kalyani Datta wrote a book on nineteenth century Bengali women which is full of rich insights and sensitive perceptions. In the preface, she cites a little verse from an

anonymous nineteenth century poet which, for her, sums up the world of women. The caged bird is an insistent motif throughout Rashsundari's text as well. Let me translate the verse here as something that I would like to address to her:

Sitting in your cage, with your eyes shut
Chained bird, what do you ponder on, within yourself?
Or, perhaps, you alone have the right to think
Since you must live through life as a bound prisoner.¹³

¹³ Kalyani Datta, *Pinjare Bashia*, Stree, Calcutta, 1996, Preface. All translations from Bengali in this book are mine.