



# Women's autobiographies and the twin shadows of class and gender.

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**Abstract:** Many women, concerned about the often inaccurate and disparaging patriarchal narratives about them, seized the opportunity presented to them in the 1960s and 1970s to tell their own stories. Women took advantage of their formal education and provided an authentic narrative about women's lives. The discipline of women's studies examines how gender not only influences popular culture and private life but also impacts laws and social policies. By examining a cross-section of disciplines dealing with political, sociological, literary, psychological, and other aspects, Women's Studies seeks to understand gender roles in past and contemporary societies. Women's and gender studies also examine how the lives of individual women and men are shaped by broader structural forces in both historical and contemporary contexts, e.g., nation-building, globalisation, economic developments, and the legal system. Women's Studies continues to reflect in its curriculum and faculty research the constantly changing directions that multiple First and Third World feminisms are taking today. This theory is discussed in the paper in relation to the Indian autobiographies written by Indian women from within their domestic sphere.

**Keywords:** women, gender, class, autobiography, feminist

Looking at women's lives in South Asia, a handful of autobiographies have become popularly acknowledged. The first autobiography in the Bengali language, perhaps the first to be printed in any Indian language, was composed by a woman.

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

*(After marriage) 'My dad 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 that much then I'd have to depend on others...'*

Rasasundari's text constitutes a foundational moment in South Asian women's writing because the whole focus of her writing is on acquiring the means of self-representation. The struggle that Rasasundari goes through as an aristocratic woman is reflected in her autobiographical self-representation. For Rasasundari, the conservative Hindu prohibitions against educating women had left her illiterate since early childhood, when she had been allowed to sit and listen to the boys' lessons in her paternal family. In adulthood, learning to read becomes an endless struggle. Married at twelve, she is twenty-five when she learns to read the Caitanya-Bhāgavata, in moments snatched from housework, in the kitchen or in her bedroom where her sisters-in-law cannot see her. She is past forty before she learns to write, since, as she explains, to write you need so many things: paper, a quill, an inkstand, someone to guide you. It is only after widowhood when she comes to live with her son and is relieved of the immense burden of housework she had borne almost from the start of her married life, that she can write her history and her story. By making her own life the subject she invests it with a value beyond what society acknowledges. She writes from within the sequestered zenana or *antahpur*, but speaks to the great world outside. The emphasis on learning and the power of the word in representing her life belies the tone of self-abnegation in which describes herself as 'dim-witted' or 'devoid of love and devotion'. Her offering is at the feet of Sarasvati and not her male consort, Narayan, who is referred to as the spouse of the goddess in a curious reversal of gender politics, by which the male god is seen as the adjunct of the goddess. These invocations, therefore, alert us to the dichotomy between the projected



persona and the underlying reality that is there in Rassundari's narrative. It may thus be seen as an important primary document in appreciating the condition of women, as well their aspirations and it is an invaluable addition to women's studies. The condition of the upper class and upper caste women in nineteenth-century Bengal was in many ways even more constrained than that of their more lowly counterparts. The privilege of being born into aristocratic families also enforced upon them the burden of upholding family honour. This meant that women were not only denied their personal freedom, but also considered as assets who may be given away in marriage to enhance the prestige of the family or the father's credit of good deeds. A girl child, no matter how loved she may have been, was always considered to be someone who would eventually grace another family. A woman could not inherit her parental property, and upon her marriage ceased to have the independence to return to the parental home unless she became a widow. Child marriage was prominent. A large number of them were married to much older, polygamous men to preserve the family's honour, resulting in early widowhood and a life of utter deprivation for many of them. If the injunctions upon a widow's lifestyle sought to curb female sexuality, the spectre of widowhood was held up to deny women the right to education, as according to superstition, learning the letters could lead to widowhood. This was certainly an effective threat to keep women away from the letters, which in turn ensured a more unquestioning acceptance of patriarchal structures. These entrenched modes of thought and behaviour were more responsible for the pitiable condition of women in Bengal during the nineteenth century.

Another autobiographical narrative by a woman is a memoir published only a few years ago, *Dayāmayeer Kathā* by Sunanda Sikdar (2008), which was translated into English by Anchita Ghatak for the feminist publishers Zubaan in 2012. Both works are set in rural East Bengal. Unlike Rassundari, it is written accidentally, forced out of her by her inability to bear any longer the burden of a past that she had deliberately 'forgotten' in a different country, and left behind when she crossed the border into India at the age of ten. Her autobiography is an exercise in recovering the suppressed memories of her early years, and processes of political division, migration and resettlement. As such, it attempts to reclaim the girl left behind, to give shape to an identity that gains wholeness through her writing.

In a recent autobiography written by a woman, *The Weave Of My Life: A Dalit Woman's*

*Memoirs*, Urmila Pawar tells the story of three generations of Mahar women. The Dalit autobiography weaves together the issues and oppression faced by the suppressed community based on their class, caste and gender. Pawar, through her activism, also talks about the lack of space within the larger feminist movement for the feminist concerns of Dalit women.

Reading women's autobiographies show a pertinent shadow of class and gender, their lives reflect their relationships with others more than in men's autobiographies, which deals with the development and success of the self. Women's autobiographical practices have become a terrain for feminist analysis because they are "a fruitful ground in examining the recent theoretical debates concerning 'the self,' 'the subject,' and 'the author' and because they articulate both women's life experiences and feminist theory (Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* 5). Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* argues "that the making and remaking of the female self in autobiography emerges from the dialogic engagement with the ideology of sexual difference promoted in the discourse of her time."

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