



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Examining Negotiations, Coherence, Contradictions, Conflicts and Resistance in Autobiographies: A Comparison of Rashsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban*, Lalithambika Antherjenam's *Memoir*, Kamala Das's *My Story* and Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*

Sruthi B.

B.Ed. Student, Department of English, Peet Memorial Training College, Mavelikara, Kerala, India

Abstract:

Writing enables a person to explore oneself and place oneself in the social order. Here the role of the person in the "normative" society becomes evident. At times the art of writing itself becomes a tool to negotiate oneself with the "normative" society. The subject explains one's position as against the restrictive forces of the "other".

This conflict is much evident in autobiographies especially in that of women's autobiographies. There is an attempt to legitimize or justify the doings of the self and thus the women's autobiographies become a manuscript of negotiations and justifications it achieves with the "other". Even though the cultural and social contexts vary, as in Western and non-western autobiographies, the struggling subject negotiates at various levels to accommodate with the other.

This paper tries to explore the negotiations, coherence, contradictions, conflicts and resistance in autobiographies through a comparison of Rashsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban*, Lalithambika Antherjenam's *Memoir*, Kamala Das's *My Story* and Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*.

In *Amar Jiban* the social status of Rashsundari Debi as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother make her take refuge in religion to hide her liberating thoughts and negotiate with the 'normative' society. Thus she becomes the representation of a 'typical Indian woman' in the nationalist scenario. On the other hand Binodini Dasi chooses to become the mistress of a man for survival and make the society accept her. Nalini Jameela takes a different stand. She justifies herself by talking about her commitment to her family. These autobiographies portray the negotiating self, at different levels and contexts, to state its existence and importance in the patriarchal society which will be discussed in detail.

"Writing was also important in the culture of the care of the self. One of the tasks that defines the care of the self is that of taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed". (Foucault 153)

Writing about one's self enables self-discovery and placing ourselves in the social order of our making. The self becomes the subject, which is determined by the social conditions and the power structures of its making. As Judith Butler writes in the essay "An account of oneself": "indeed when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence." The agency of the subject, in most cases, arises from the attempt to resist the oppressor. The autobiographies involve a resistance against the social order and defining oneself as per the social order.

The women's autobiographies are often found to be moving away from representing their real self. It problematizes the whole concept of "taking care of the self" through the action of narrating the self. They become manuscripts that define oneself in the social order against an "other", which is inevitably the patriarchal system. "I am implicated in a relation to the other before whom and to whom I speak. Thus, I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to address myself to the one who addresses me." (Butler 15). This proves that the act of narrating about oneself is never departed from the recognition of the "other". Therefore there is always an attempt to get accepted by the "other", which is in most of the cases the subject's immediate social order.

As a result, rather than presenting oneself as a resisting subject that acts against the "other" the agency of the subject assumes the role of a negotiating subject trying hard to place oneself in the "normative society". There is an attempt to legitimize or justify the doings of the self and thus the women's autobiographies become a manuscript of negotiations and justifications it achieves with the "other". As a result of this we find multiple voices, incoherence, contradictions and conflicts in self-writing. The resisting subject gives way to a negotiating self, in an attempt to recognize itself as a part of the political, cultural and moral reasoning of the social order.

We can perceive the negotiating subject in both the Western as well as the non-western autobiographies. As the moral reasoning depends a lot on the cultural context we find the western subject negotiating with the social order at a different level. Resistance often acts at a much higher level in western autobiographies but still the subject recognizes the presence of “other”. This paper attempts to examine the resistance, negotiations, coherence, presence of multiple voices and contradictions in non-western autobiographies, in relation to the western autobiographies. The autobiographies that I examine in the course of the paper include Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, Lalithambika Antherjenam’s *Memoir*, Kamala Das’s *My Story* and Rashsundari Debi’s *Amar Jiban*. It is important to note that in all these autobiographies we find a subject struggling against the patriarchal social order and at the same time puts in effort to become an “ideal” woman according to the notions held by the society.

According to J. Devika, an “ideal woman was located within the modern home, an overseer of material goods, bodies and souls.” (1676). She further mentions that the notion of the “ideal” woman in the eyes of a patriarchal social order is:

the union of two distinct figures, which may be called the "domestic woman", and the "aesthetic woman". While the former was the provider of progeny, the manager of material and the guardian of souls in the modern home, the aesthetic woman had a function which was almost in antipathy to this. The aesthetic woman was the provider of pleasure, she who cemented modern conjugality through ensuring pleasure. The ideal woman, in whom these figures are seen to combine harmoniously, is expected to remain strictly self-controlled and provide aesthetic pleasure to the husband. In this sense, this ideal woman differs sharply from the kulina of the classical texts.(1676)

Kamala Das, Nalini Jameela, Rashsundari Debi and Lalithambika Antherjenam through their autobiographies make attempts to stay at par with this definition of an “ideal” woman. They negotiate and justify themselves throughout to find a place for them in the “normative” social order. As a result we often find incoherence. Prima facie they may appear to be woman who resists the patriarchal powers. They speak either for themselves or try to reflect the voice of a community through theirs. But behind the veil it is an attempt to negotiate. Thus to certain extent these autobiographies tend to represent the submission to the “other”. These women attempt to define themselves as an “ideal” woman while trying to resist the patriarchal order.

Rashsundari Debi’s *Amar Jiban* was the first woman’s autobiography to be published in Bengali. In an article “Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women”, Srabashi Gosh notices that “The first Bengali autobiography was published in 1876. The title page described the authoress as Rashsundari Devi as a religious lady and a devoted house wife” (W 88). Though *Amar Jiban* was published during a period when women were prevented from getting educated the book gained a high recognition as the first attempt by a woman to break the traditional social norms. Even the title page gives her the identity of a “religious lady” and a “devoted housewife” and not a “writer”. Rashsundari also doesn’t attempt to fight and achieve the role of a writer. She presents herself to the readers as a conforming house wife and a religious girl, the right combination for the position of an “ideal” woman.

Throughout the autobiography the readers have to cope up two voices – the voice of a conformist wife and a religious woman on one hand and a “rebellious” woman trying to educate herself on the other. She moves between both these throughout the text. In one instance she calls herself a “sinner” and asks “Why was I born a woman?” (167) and expresses her desire to learn later she writes: “The Lord of the world was nonetheless kind to me; he gave me a bit of all that worldly people need. There was no room for any regret. I had my share of all that brings pleasure to householders; thank the Lord – sons and daughters, servants and maids, loyal tenants, relatives and kinsmen, status and honour, pleasure and enjoyment.” The presence of multiple voices taking different positions invites incoherence to the text. We fail to identify the position of the narrator in the social order.

Rashsundari Debi started to learn at a time when the women had to “observe proprieties, do their work at home, cook and serve the food.”(Debi 182). Education was denied to them and believed that such an act marks the beginning of Kaliyuga. Those who educated were considered “cardinal sinners”. But still she initiates into teaching herself and rested her life in the hands of the “adhikari” (God). Her relation with God is established since her childhood. Though she often complains about the miserable times that she have at her husband’s house, she considers it as the Lord’s design. She writes” Anyway, the Lord had taken care of me all that while, I was happy and contented. I can only say that whatever he does is providential.”(172). She also considers it as God’s grace to get an opportunity to learn and gain knowledge. She asks God to teach her read. She expresses her anger and discomfort through her worship to God. She never expresses anything problematic overtly. Tanika Sarkar writes:

Rashsundari attained a level of mastery in signifying something very different from what she was saying overtly. She did it by a careful framing of her direct statements. She would conclude an episode with pious statement, resigning herself to divine will. At the same time, she surrounded it with vivid details that very painful consequences flowing from her obedience. As a result, the surface message got scrambled and confused so that she appeared compliant...(98)

This incoherence in her expression of thought makes it difficult for one to identify what she exactly means and makes herself acceptable to the social order.

Throughout *Amar Jiban* we find Rashsundari Debi depending on the agency of God. This is a method she uses to negotiate with the social order which preferred a religious housewife. By narrating her experience as a devotee and as a responsible house wife she earns herself a position in the patriarchal order. But the attempts to place herself in both positions – as a householder and a “modern woman”, her statements appear contradictory. She states that her life is miserable engrossed in days of labour often without but later she tells the readers that she is happy and the God has provided her with all that she wanted.

The very act of learning to read and write in secret makes her a brave woman. But Rashsundari later states that she is even scared of her husband’s horse Jayahari. She writes:

There was a horse in the house, it was called Jayahari. One day, my eldest son was sat upon it and was brought inside so that I could see him. I could hear folks say that this horse belongs to Karta and some of them called out to me: Come and see, your son is riding a

horse. Since I had heard that this was Karta's horse, I began to wonder: how can I go out and stand before it? It must be shameful if the Karta's horse gets to see me. So I hid myself inside. (175)

Though her statements appear contradictory she is considered as one of the emergent modern woman. The Nationalist leaders chose her to represent the national history of 19th century Bengal. What they wanted was a woman with modern thoughts who still stood within the confines of the family. She is the "ideal" woman who is a harmonious combination of the "domestic" as well as "aesthetic" woman. She negotiates with the existing patriarchal norms to gain such a position. Besides substantiating her social position using religion as a tool, she goes to the extent of making her political choices based on that. She establishes herself as a Vaishnavite. For an outsider Rashsundari never transcends the borders created by the patriarchy. Her quest for knowledge becomes pardonable when it is carefully puts that behind the veil of religion. Who finds it difficult to accept a religious housewife who follows the traditional path?

A parallel, though not completely, can be drawn between the social situations of Rashsundari and Lalithambika Antherjenam. Though born in different parts of India there are certain elements that bring them together. Lalithambika Antherjenam was born in a Namboothiri family in Kerala. Though Namboothiri's were wealthy priests and the highest land owning class at that point of time the women of this caste had to face regular oppression. They were not allowed to get educated and were married off at a younger age. Once they attain puberty they were not allowed to remain in the "antahpuram" without covering the upper parts of their body. They were allowed to go to the temple and to close relative's carrying a "marakkuda". Most of the girls were married at a younger age and to older namboothiris who would already have many wives. When the husband dies the girl will have to spend rest of her life inside the house bearing the rebuke of the other wives of her husband. If any woman of the family gets involved in a relationship with another man, she will be subjected to "smarthavicharam" and will be cast out of the community.

Lalithambika Antherjenam was born into such a social situation. But being born into a family of less traditionally oriented and highly educated people she got the opportunity to learn unlike Rashsundari Debi. She narrates to us an incident that happened soon after her birth. Seeing that it's a girl her father told her mother that it is better to go to Madras and marry an English woman. When her mother asked, "What if she has a daughter?" (Antherjenam 134), he replied, "At least I will be allowed to bring her up like a human being. I will have the liberty to educate her, give her freedom to grow and get married to a god man" (134). This expresses the "modern" mentality of her father. Lalithambika Antherjenam got married to a man who supported her throughout her career and life. Standing within such a family situation she wrote for the liberation of women in the Namboothiri community.

Lalithambika Antherjenam becomes the vice of a community at the same time trying to create for herself an identity in the social structure. While being a writer, she tried hard to merge herself with the social norms. Thus she became a dutiful mother and wife. She never fell behind in her responsibilities, even while fighting herself to become a writer. She invited the rebuke of namboothiris right from the first public meeting she attended. The meeting was conducted by Sri Mannath Padmanabhan in Mavelikkara. The meeting was an epoch making incident and other women activists from the namboothiri community like devaki Narikkatiri, arya pallom, parvati Nenminimangalam took part in the meeting. Once she returned home after the meeting she was cursed by her mother and other members of the family moved away from the "taravad". Lalithambika and her husband had to find a new home and start earning their own living as this incident invited resentment from her husband's family. But these incidents didn't prevent her from getting involved in writing more and participating in public meetings. But this overtly rebellious woman had another face too. She tries to portray herself as dutiful mother and a wife. She had to fulfill "numerous domestic obligations" (xxiv) and this often prevented her from giving the required attention to her career as a writer. She clearly mentions the conflict that she witnesses between her life as a writer and her life as a wife, daughter and mother. She writes:

I think there has been the same sort of duality in my life that many women writers face: the conflict between the individual as an artist and the individual as the member of a family. A woman has to act both the roles effectively. She has to be consistently sincere. For a man, the family is a refuge, a resting place. But it is the main area of action of a woman, and if she fails there she fails totally. At the same time the province of art demands the complete dedication of the soul. So she must read, study, think, write and engage in debate, there is no room for narrow thoughts in this vast domain of activity (160)

By positioning herself in the domain of a family she proves herself to be woman living in harmony with the social order. She further writes: "she wrote, read and made speeches. When I look back, I see the young mother crouched on the ground, writing as she rocks the cradle" (Antherjenam141). This is a negotiation that she attains with the patriarchal social order. This helps her to find a "legitimate" place in the social order.

Lalithambika Antherjenam presents her husband, Narayanan Namboothiri as a man who supported her in her literary and cultural life. She never talks about a difference of opinion between them. She mentions that "they have been mutually supportive companions now for forty two years. There have been occasions when they felt too tired to go on, when they lost and confused. But their griefs and burdens brought them closer together... Now that she had a comrade to help her achieve her aims and desires, she grew stronger."(140). Though she never claims herself to be a confirming wife like Rashsundari Debi, by abstaining from revealing any kind of troubles that might have existed between her and her husband she brings forth the idea of a perfect family, comprising of mutually supporting spouses. The thought of the ideal family will subsequently lead to the concept of an "ideal" woman.

Thus Lalithambika Antherjenam like Rashsundari Debi becomes the representative of "modernity". The reforms movements in the Namboothiri community happened parallel to the nationalist movement and thus in many ways contributed to the creation of the "ideal" woman as suggested by the national movements.

The whole social situation that we find in *Amar Jiban* and Lalithambika Antherjenam's *Memoir* changes when it comes to Kamala Das's *My Story*. In this autobiography the concept of the "ideal" woman changes. In the words of J Devika:

In *Ente Katha*, Madhavikutty uses the romantic notion of the self brilliantly to critique the entrenched womanly ideal of Malayalee modernity. This autobiography (and indeed, much of her other writings) cuts loose the two figures joined together in the dominant womanly ideal. This signals the revolt of the aesthetic woman. First, she rejects the housewife's centring upon domestic labour as drab, demeaning, unhappy, and unbeautiful, projecting an alternate maternal figure defined by playfulness, storytelling, laughter, and the willingness to listen to and empathise with children. Secondly, she brings back the body - marginalised and de-eroticised in dominant reformist discourse - into her revision of the womanly. (1676)

Unlike the two autobiographies that were dealt with earlier, Kamala Das's autobiography stands apart from these. In *My Story* she expresses the emotions overtly and this was one of the reasons that invited criticisms from different spheres of the society. She was born in a famous Nair family which had once followed the matrilineal system. She was convent educated and lived in Calcutta while a lot of women during her time were prevented from having basic education. She was also born into a family of writers. As a result like Lalithambika Antherjenam or Rashsundari Debi, she never had to face any restrictions in the society. Women were liberated and were mostly the heads of the families unlike many other communities. What fails in the case of Kamala Das is her marriage. She had to face the brutality of sex under her husband and had a tough time leading a family life. She describes her life as a failure and expresses the need to attain divorce. She writes:

I could not admit at all that my marriage had flopped. I could not return home to the Nalapat House a divorcee for there had been goodwill between our two families for three generations which I did not want to ruin... My parents and their relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society's reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was a distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. If I had at that time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to find another who would volunteer to marry me... (Das 97)

Even when her pen friend asks her to divorce her husband and leave with him to Italy she retorts "I am not the divorcing kind". Here we find a seemingly "liberated" "modern" woman, who speaks overtly about sexual brutalities and failing family lives, remaining within the confines of the family and obeying the patriarchal settings to preserve the integrity and status of the family. This is a negotiation she attempts with the social order in order to find her a place in the society in the midst of all the criticisms waged against her. The changing morality of the society around her is one of the reasons that force her to reach such a negotiation. Being born into a Nair family, which once practiced polyandry the morality of the family would never question her divorce but it is the changed morality of the society which no longer allowed polyandry that makes her to conform to the existing social order.

To fulfill this ideal we often find her contradicting her own ideas. She states that household activities tend to be drab and demeaning. But, at the same time we find her confining herself to household activities and fulfilling her duties to her husband to keep her family moving forward. She writes:

Then I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the buttons on and darned our old garments all through the hot afternoons. In the evening I brought for my husband his tea and a plate of snacks. I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried... In the mornings when my husband left for work, I ran behind him and stood near the corner of the road... (Das 93)

Kamala Das tries to take the role of a responsible wife to gain the love of her husband and keep their family going. Though she has to put in a lot of effort to become a good wife what comes to her naturally is the role of a mother. She is a perfect mother who loved her children and who wanted to spend time with her children. By portraying her as a dutiful, all-bearing wife and perfect mother for her children she is covertly assuming the role of an "ideal" woman. Through this she tries to find a way to escape the rebuke of the society and gain acceptance.

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker unlike the other three autobiographies that we have so far dealt with presents a resisting subject. Here the "self" struggles with the existing morality. Nalini Jameela took up the job willingly and considered it as a job that helps her earn her living like any other profession. As a result she calls herself as a "sex worker". She is neither a "domestic woman" nor an "aesthetic woman" she is a labourer who performs sexual labour to lead her life. In her interview with J. Devika while talking about the incident where some of her friends confides in her that their parents have problems in them meeting her as men were "doing things" to her, Nalini Jameela retorts by pointing out that "the 'things' that my clients did to me were almost the same as the 'things' their husbands did to them." (Jameela 172) Through such an approach the stigma associated with the concept of "prostitution" can be negated. Though Nalini Jameela resists the moral attacks of the society, at the same time she tries to negotiate with the same social order. She brings forth the descriptions of her life with her husband Shahulka.

Shahulka was the eldest in a family of ten. He was respected by everyone in the family. So I too was given a very high status. They were not told anything about me, except that I was a widow. His relatives held me in high regard. I used to be in the lead when there were special occasions in the family, like marriages and other rituals. (55)

These descriptions appear to be attempts to place herself as a "domestic woman". She maintains the marital relation for some time and states that she was happy to have a family with lot of relatives who took care of her and her daughter. She even changes the religion and became Nalini Jameela for the grabbing the love and respect of her husband's family. Here we find the resisting woman taking up an attempt to become an "ideal" woman, negotiating with the existing social order.

The resisting "subject" becomes a negotiating subject here. Later we find the "contradicting subject" as well. Foucault points out in "Technologies of the Self" that "confession is a mark of truth". Thus here we find Jameela confessing all her "sins" and taking up a life devoid of "sins". But the "negotiating self" which tries to find a place in the social order by confessing all the sins and taking assuming the status of a "domestic woman" later retorts:

I put forward some other views; trying to argue that sex workers were different from other women... we are free in four respects. We don't have to cook and wait for a husband; we don't have to wash his dirty clothes; we don't have to ask for our husband's permission

to raise our kids as we deem fit; and we don't have to run after our husbands claiming rights to their property to raise our kids..." (106-107)

She contradicts herself here. Though she talks about the responsibilities that a sex worker does not have to take up in their entire life, it would be necessary to remember that she once preferred doing all this. There was also a time when she used to seek financial help from her husband and his relatives to raise her child. She tries to prove herself to a good mother and a responsible wife. She never says that married life is restricted to sex workers. But she makes the above statement while she holds these views and follows them. By stating her ability to lead a family life and carry out the domestic as well as social responsibilities she is trying to "legitimize" herself. Even her attempt to place her in the social sphere is an act of "legitimization".

By examining the three autobiographies *Amar Jiban*, Lalithambika Antherjenam's *Memoir, The Autobiography of a Sex Worker and My Story*, we reach at the juncture where we find that all the subjects are resisting and at the same time "negotiating". In their attempt to negotiate with the social structure of their making these subjects assume multiple voices, become incoherent, express conflicts and contradictions. This is not just the case with non-western subjects. Even the Western subjects often come up with incoherent and contradicting narratives of the self. In the *Letters Home* by Sylvia Plath we find that some of the letters present her as a resisting subject but at the same time appears to be incoherent and contradicting. At one point she writes "Living apart from Ted is wonderful. I am no longer in his shadow and it is heaven to be liked myself alone, knowing what I want..." (479) but later she writes to her mother "the flesh has dropped from my bones. But I am a fighter...I have no one...stuck down here as into a sack. I fight for air and freedom and the culture and the libraries of the city." (465) Sylvia Plath is quite incoherent about her emotions and also finds it difficult to understand what she really needs. She is emotionally as well as financially dependent on her mother, especially after she sought divorce for Ted Hughes.

This proves that no "self", western or non-western, in the woman's autobiographies are completely resisting and coherent. They are always conscious about the existence of the "other" which prevents them from adopting their own stands in the social order. They can only seek for negotiations to find a place for themselves in the social order.

References

- i. Antherjenam, Lalithambika. *Cast Me Out if You Will: Stories and Memoir*. Trans. Gita Krishnankutty. Calcutta: Stree, 1998. Print.
- ii. Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. Print.
- iii. Chatterjee, Partha. "Women and the Nation". *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. New Delhi: OUP, 1999. Print.
- iv. Das, Kamala. *My Story*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009. print.
- v. Debi, Rashesundari. *Amar Jiban*. n.d. Print.
- vi. Devika, J. "Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies of Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 1675-1679+1681-1683. Web.
- vii. Foucault, Michael. "Technologies of the Self". *The Essential Foucault*. New York: The New Press, 2003. Print.
- viii. Gosh, Srabashi. "Birds in a Cage: Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1986): WS88-WS96. Web.
- ix. Jameela, Nalini. *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. Trans. J Devika. New Delhi: Westland Ltd, 2007. Print.
- x. Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1975. Print.
- xi. Sarkar, Tanika. "A Book of her Own". *A Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman*. From *Myths to markets: Essays on Gender*.