

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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**Lecture-15**  
**Nation through the Lens of Women's Autobiographies**

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we saw how the new woman was constructed in binary terms of home, world, public, private, spiritual material etcetera. Even though the 19th century focused on women's question women and their voices were not taken into account. The new woman was created to fit into the newer models of patriarchy. This woman was different from the materialist memsahibs and also the lower-class women who did not have the same cultural department.

In this way binaries were created not only among men and women but also amongst women. Mem sahib, bhadramahila, upper-class, lower-class women. Inscribing sexual morality as a way to achieve spiritual supremacy became a common trope in the writings of the 19th century. In his story a journal of 48 hours in the year 1945 which is a futuristic dystopia published in 1835. Kylas Chunder Dutt talks about an uprising against the British Lord Fell Butcher under the leadership of Bhooban Mohan.

The story is celebrated as the first science fiction in India which very closely predicted the year of independence. Now what is important to note in this story is the way in which it builds the supremacy of the Indians in the moral ground. The story describes an incident where Lord Fell Butcher is seen to be having an affair with a 14-year-old damself all the while being married to Bibi Sahib.

The story indicates that decay in Western moral codes. It presents the British officials as bloodthirsty oppressors but this addition of this incident has specific significance. Now the reason why I gave the reference to this story is to highlight how the narrative around morality was created by keeping women at the center stage. You have to remember that these ideals were all created or constructed for women.

But we can also ask where the women only constructed, how do they construct themselves? Now the women's question as Partha Chatterjee has popularly mentioned was resolved by

imposing certain ideals on women vis-a-vis nation. How did women negotiate with this nationalist question? In this lecture we will take a look at women's autobiographies in the 19th and early 20th centuries for a detailed view on this.

Modern autobiographical writing in India emerged during the colonial period and it invoked A new concept of an educated upper class male individual. This individual was drastically different from its Western counterpart. As Partha Chatterjee postulates these 19th century autobiographies focused on the facts of social history and the development of new cultural norms for the collective life of the nation rather than the exploration of individuality and the inner workings of personality.

By writing the individual within the narrative of the nation these authors were also reclaiming citizenship. That was denied by the British colonial regime. Such declamation entailed a restructuring of the world by dividing it into outer material world and the inner spiritual world. We have discussed in detail how the material world represented the west and the spiritual signified the Indian culture.

The former represented the colonial rule and the latter became the site for the development of an indigenous identity through the hegemonic discourse of nationalism. Suchitra Mathur goes on to explain that since this nationalist ideology was inscribed primarily on the body of the woman who was deliberately refashioned during this period to become the embodiment of an invaluable Indian identity.

The notion of subjectivity in women's autobiography was tired even more so than in the men's to the life of the nation. The over determining presence of nationalist question in Indian women's life histories interestingly did not always mean an unquestioned acceptance of patriarchal nationalisms. Their autobiography is therefore became the site to explore the social constructions of Indian women and the Indian woman's construction of herself.

The 19th century women's autobiographies were not the life history of the narrator or the development of herself but rather the social history of its times. The 19th century women's autobiographies were seen to be representing the concerns and the social conditions of that time where women were the observers rather than the participants. Vina Mazumdar points out

their writings highlights urged and also urged the leaders for a fresh look at the social ideology and gender relations of an unequal stratified society.

These autobiographies were read from a feminist point of view. As representing a different image of an Indian woman than what it portrayed in the dominant writings by the male authors. Writings of the self or autobiographies contributed in interrogating the category Indian woman and formulating an alternative image often. As Smith and Watson point out by incorporating hitherto unspoken female experience in telling their own stories women revise the content and purpose of autobiography and insisted on alternative stories.

Women writers challenge the autobiographical norms by posing themselves as subjects of their writings and broke the boundaries of private in which they were relegated by putting their writings out in the public sphere. Smith and Watson also write that building a feminist voice has also done by recovering women's writings from earlier periods. For example, the two volumes of women's writing in India by Tharu and Lalita contributed immensely in transforming the epistemic milieu surrounding gender.

As Tharu and Lalita point out the reason to build the archive of women's writings in India were to make available for English language readers in India and also around the world a group of works that illuminate the conditions in which women wrote. Bring more significant women's writings to light, help us re-evaluate writers who were reasonably well known but had been misunderstood or dismissed.

Give us a sense of the themes and literary modes women drew on and made use of and help us capture what is at stake in the practices of self or agency and or narrative that emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire and the nation. The order of gender as J. Devika puts it was projected to be an ideal social ordering maintained through clear demarcations between gender roles.

Men were posited in the external realm of the public, political, economic and intellectual and women were supposed to naturally assume the role of an efficient homemaker and a true partner of the men. In other words, a companionate marriage as we have learned in earlier lectures. Now in order to maintain this natural binary women's education aim to develop a modern individual who would be able to conform to the idealized modern gendered subjectivities.

The modern woman called out of the traditional order and created to be free from bondage to tradition where to exist as the guardians of the home and the Earth in a relation of complementarity with man. The 19th century becomes an interesting starting point to examine the constitution of Indian women because on the one hand tracks were being written dictating modes of behaviour for young and educated women.

And on the other hand, there was an upsurge of women writers narrating their life histories. This juxtaposition of the official construction of femininity defined in terms of chastity, obedience and docility with the personal narratives of women presents more than one construction of femininity. The notion of constructed identity as opposed to fixed given identity shows that Indian woman is not a fixed category.

A reading of women's autobiographies belonging to different times and histories would throw light not only on the dominant constructions of Indian women across history, but also on the strategies of self-fashioning and self-reconstruction by these women. We have already discussed in earlier lectures how Rassundari Devi in her autobiography *Aamar Jiban* presents a very different idea of a woman.

Instead of nationalist ideals she mentions how her life in the in-laws house is like a prison. This is an important contribution because it brings out the private sphere in the discussion. Rassundari is seen to portray an alternative identity of Indian woman who is not a mute observer but has the ability to critically understand women's oppression and defy the norms by learning to read and write.

Rassundari's autobiography has highlighted the women of the antahpur were repositioned to fit the needs of the new patriarchy by getting education, but their roles as obedient subjects and protectors of material, goods, bodies and souls remained unchanged. The ideal woman as J. Devika opines was supposed to be the amalgamation of domestic woman and aesthetic woman.

While the former was the provider of progeny the manager of material and guardian of souls in the modern home the aesthetic woman had a function which was almost antipathy to this. The aesthetic woman was the provider of pleasure. She who cemented modern conjugality

through ensuring pleasure. I would like to extend this definition further and argue that the aesthetic woman necessarily had to belong to the upper class.

Because education Leisure of writing etcetera were available only to the upper-class upper caste bhadramahilas. This modern-day woman is expected to remain strictly self-controlled and provide aesthetic pleasure to the husband. This woman should be able to effortlessly discuss and understand Oscar Wilde and Aldous Huxley and be ready to bear her breast at the slightest indication of the husband.

The balance between the two kinds of woman was best maintained by the wife of her grand uncle in Kamala Dasa's autobiography *My Story*. Kamala Das writes I have heard my grand Uncle tell his wife that she was the most empty-headed woman he had known. She used to laugh melodiously at such comments. At night she enslaved him with her voluptuous body. So, she could well afford to humor him in the day.

Each night she came to our house accompanied by her mates and a lantern looking like a bride and she walked up the steep staircase of the gate house to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom, kept fragrant with incense and Jasmine garlands. In her we see the perfect combination of a wife and an aesthetic woman. In the morning she listens to her husband's mockery without any comb thereby presenting the image of a perfect docile wife.

And at night she dresses up like an entertainer but only to please the husband. By remaining within the boundaries of marriage and monogamy the duality of the wife's character is thus legitimized. You must also remember that despite her critique of patriarchal regulations for women *Rassundari* in her autobiography *Amar Jiban* retains the gender hierarchy within the family.

She repeatedly mentions that although her venture into education began as a solo journey the ultimate success came with the guidance of her sons. She in fact erases the public and material aspects of education by arguing that knowledge is not just about earning money, it is about exploration of the inner being. In this way she can be seen as domesticizing education.

*Amar Jiban* therefore presents a universalized image of the pre-constructed and reconstructed Indian woman strictly defined in terms of modern, nationalized ideologies. The ideologies of

chastity, purity and obedience that *Amar Jiban* enforces are specific to the upper caste and upper-class family that *Rassundari* belongs to. Sumanta Banerjee points out as I have mentioned in earlier lectures as well how the central focus on women in the *Anthapur* which he calls *Andarmahal* hides a vast majority of working women.

Either self-employed women like *naptenis*, sweepers, owners of stall selling vegetables or fish. Street singers or dancers, maidservants or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed produce, mustard, linseed etcetera. What gets erased in *Rassundari* identification of dominant representation of Indian women and her self-construction of the same is The difference among women based on class and caste.

*Rassundari* belongs to an upper caste upper class landlord family where she enjoys class privilege. She mentions that the possibility of women going out for work and earning money was considered a shame to the entire family. In such constructions of the ideal Indian woman therefore naturally viewed lower class lower caste women who participated in work outside their house as impure and inferior.

Partha Chatterjee writes the new woman was quite the reverse of the common woman who was coarse vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority.

By assuming homogeneity of Indian women, *Amar Jiban* completely silences the maids in *Rassundari*'s house who are occasionally referred to in describing the numbers of workers in the house. In its over emphasis on the acquired freedom of *Rassundari* in terms of education Indian feminist scholars have also often identified Indian woman as a universal category. Therefore, both in the textual representation and feminist interpretation of Indian woman as a singular entity the difference among Indian women is erased.

In this context Binodini Dasi's autobiography *My Story and My Life as an Actress* is significant. Binodini Dasi was the first woman performer in a theater in Bengal. Her life is significant in unveiling, the casteist-sexism latent within the Bengali society. Theater a public

space remained inaccessible to respectable upper caste women and was deemed suitable only for women such as Binodini a lower caste prostitute.

Her caste identity however was also the reason why her work was devalued. In her autobiography she mentions how in life and in terms of her contribution to theater both monetarily and artistically she has been completely marginalized. Binodini has always been defined through her caste identity. This highlights the necessity for an intersectional angle. Her cast identity and her mother's profession as a prostitute automatically marks her as dirty and untouchable.

Now touch ability here is not restricted to caste alone, when combined with gender it also marks sexual availability. Due to Binodini's caste identity, she is considered to be sexually available, added to that her profession as a theater performer is seen as an extension of such stereotyping. In fact, she mentions in her autobiography that male actors were all held in high esteem.

They were considered artists, the caste discourse that relies primarily on the notions of impurity and untouchability presumes the sexual availability of Dalit women. Therefore, when Dalit women go out for work, they are often given only those kinds of work that are deemed suitable for them due to their identity as lower caste women. In this way Dalit women are re-inscribed in a casteist sexiest public space.

It is for this reason that we cannot think of women being a homogeneous category. Now let us summarize today's lecture. We have discussed in detail especially in the previous lectures how new woman was constructed in the nationalist period to accommodate the changing structures of patriarchy. The change retained division of public, private, spiritual material as necessarily gendered spaces.

But women were not bound only by these constructions. They were imposed on them. In this lecture we tried to explore that question how did the women of 19th and early 20th century construct themselves to elucidate this argument we drew upon women's autobiographies? We saw how the Andarmahal or the private domestic sphere became a matter of discussion.

Women's autobiography is also challenged the masculine proclamation of grandeur usually attached to autobiographical narratives. Women's autobiographies often emerge as a collective

endeavour. Interestingly however this woman is also not a homogeneous entity. As we see in case of Amar Jiban Rassundari is an upper caste upper class woman and often the women of lower classes get erased in the autobiography.

Binodini Dasi on the other hand addresses this specific matter the experience of a lower caste woman and we see how they differ from each other. It is for this reason that even when we are talking about women constructing themselves through their writings, we need to remember that it is not a monolithic entity. In the next lecture we will delve into further issues concerning gender, labour and violence. Thank you.

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