Representation of the Self: A Study of selected Women’s Autobiographies from Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Bengal

Introduction
This study of four women’s autobiographies from late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal relates to issues of self, subjectivity and self representation, in the following texts: Amar Jiban (1868, 1897 My Life) by Rashsundari Debi, Amar Katha (1910 My Story) and Amar Abhinetri Jiban (1910-11 My Life as an Actress) by Binodini Dasi, The Memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: From Child Widow to Lady Doctor (1930s, published 2000) by Haimabati Sen and Jibaner Jharapata (1945, 1972 Life’s Fallen Leaves) by Sarala Debi Chaudhurani. The significance of these texts lies in the way the autobiographers draw on contemporary discourses to construct themselves in writing, as also in their perception, often implicit, of their autobiographical selves as constructs. Self-identity or the sense of ‘I’ in these autobiographies is never ‘a priori’ or given but discursively produced with reference to a wide range of discourses.

The idea of discourse does not occlude but includes the material bases of the various self-constructions. Some of the diverse discourses, which underpin the different self-representations, are of religion and literacy in Amar Jiban, dramatic performance in Binodini’s Amar Katha and Amar Abhinetri Jiban, Brahmoism and western medicine in Haimabati Sen’s Memoirs, education and nationalism in Sarala Debi’s Jibaner Jharapata. This constellation of discourses provided the basis of writing the self in a number of women’s autobiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The discursively shaped identities that emerge in and through the autobiographical writings are predominantly plural and complex. Further, even the sense of inwardness or interiority is discursively constructed by a web of discourses. The notion of discourse is further so intricately enmeshed with the question of language, that it is inseparable from it. Further, following the Foucauldian paradigm, human subjectivity and identity is itself produced out of various discursive formations as a result of the subject’s entry into language.

The civilising mission of the colonial/imperial government gave an impetus to social reform and helped the development of women’s education. This fact, along with the presence of a flourishing print culture by the end of the nineteenth century, opened up to the upper and middle class Bengali women of that generation the
possibility of writing the self. Bengali women, prior to this, had no clearly discernible identity in any archive that could be delved into and recovered, except in some fictional representations. However, there are traces of a fairly well developed oral culture (Banerjee 1989). Further, hard as it is to locate actual/real historical women, the metaphoric and figurative construct of women is ubiquitous as the ground of numerous discursive formations. Thus, we find women in discourses of Hindu tradition (Chakravarti 1989), and Brahmanical patriarchy in circulation among Orientalists and later, in discourses of reform (Sangari 1989, 1991: 32-123) indigeneity and nationalism (Chatterjee 1992). The persona of the Bengali woman — and this pertains to women from other regions as well — is largely constructed around these categories.

With the introduction of women’s education, however, one observes the first, hesitant, highly mediated steps towards self-articulation, which find expression in a number of women’s autobiographies (Karlekar 1991, Mukherjee 1988). Also, given the level of interest in print media it could be viewed as the moment of women’s entry into the public sphere (Habermas 1981). In fact, Habermaas’s notion of the intersubjective constitution of the self and the evolution of self-identity through communicative interaction with others is a significant point to explain how a literary form/mode/genre is publicly shaped and how subjectivity is oriented to an audience (Pia Lara 1997). In this view, the innermost core of the private is socially shaped and culturally rooted.

While these personal narratives have been analysed at length (Karlekar 1991, Mukherjee 1999) the thrust of the analytic interventions has been largely generic, not differential. The analyses, with one or two notable exceptions (Sarkar 1999, Bhattacharya 1998), have focused on the aspect of social documentation in women’s life writings. While it is obvious that women’s autobiographical writings are valuable social documents and a vital resource for exploring contemporary history and culture, an exclusive focus on autobiographies as social documents could lead to a subsuming of the individual in the social, which could result in a flattening out and excessive homogenisation. This work explores the social shaping of interiority while examining how the sense of self is culturally rooted and “contingent on the possibilities provided by a particular culture” (Bree 1986, 230). The attempt, here, is to see these writings as localised articulations by women, on issues of subjectivity, identity, self-
representation and the body. Further, these self-articulations can be seen in varying ways and degrees to uphold and consolidate, undermine or puncture, or to exist as parallel and different versions – counternarratives – of the mainstream and dominant narratives of modern Indian history, focussing on emancipation and nationalism.

The autobiographical writings in question, however, put forward no clear, definite agenda or even a consistent social critique. Nor do they always evince a coherent subjectivity with a well worked out sense of agency or political purpose, which may be one of the reasons, politically speaking, why these writings have been marginalized in mainstream histories (for a well worked out account of women's writings in India, see Tharu and Lalita 1991, “Introduction”). The perspectives on identity offered by these autobiographies seem partial and disjunctive, occasional and sporadic. There is often little sense of a cumulative build-up or a distinct teleology. Why then, have these texts been chosen for study? In a sense, it is precisely because of the reasons outlined above that these life writings call for closer scrutiny, since they often go against the grain of traditionally established generic norms of autobiographies. Further, the critical moment seems right for a second look, since the critical insights of postmodernism and feminism have intersected in ways so as to broaden and re-map the terrain of autobiographical studies. For all its declarations about the death of the subject, postmodernism, perhaps paradoxically, can help in redefining and re-siting subjectivity and identity in radically new ways. In this work, therefore, I explore and analyse the selected autobiographies from the viewpoint of theoretical formulations and possibilities offered by recent debates and discussions on autobiography and post-modernism. Such an approach is necessitated by the range of debates in both these areas that have highlighted, explicitly or otherwise, ideas of localised articulations and contingent sites where the self is both constructed and represented. In other words, the intention in choosing these texts is not to do an aggregative or enumerative analysis, but to map the terrain wherein the texts can be located, and to chart cartographies of struggle within the chosen field.

Generally speaking, autobiographies have become newly prominent as texts in theoretical, especially poststructuralist, debates on the status of the self, the nature of self-representation and of language. Increasingly, it has been pointed out that autobiography has become ‘the’ genre where the relationship between literature and life has turned out to be the most problematic (Jelinek 1980, Mason 1980, Brodski
and Schenle 1989, Marcus 1994). At this historical juncture, then, is it possible to pose the question of the self; or should we go along with critics who feel that the self and subject is merely an effect of language? Further, if we hold that the self and subject is an effect of language, what are its theoretical, practical and political implications? Is not a ‘return to self’ and subjectivity more empowering, especially for categories of people with a history of subjection?

My interest in attempting to articulate the concerns irradiating the autobiographical writings of some Bengali women is impelled, and perhaps imperilled, by a desire to examine their narrative trajectories in the broad context of the anti-foundationalist anti-essentialist thrust of postmodernism. Is it possible to posit questions of agency, subjectivity and identity in the intellectual climate unleashed by post structuralism? Is it possible to use the crisis of subjectivity mounted by post modernity to critique the tendency in existing literature, to conflate the ideological construct of woman with the actual lived histories of women? Can one effect a shift within the identity politics of post-colonial feminism which often erases the autobiographical subject’s specific historical contexts, to locate in these life writings, places of resistance, involving the writings of multiple, contradictory, experimental identities?

As a result of sustained interrogation of all foundational thinking, its questioning of grand narratives of man, metaphysics and history, postmodernism has been viewed as the most thoroughgoing critique of the individual subject, where the subject is merely another position in language. Subjectivity, in this line of thinking, is never complete, whole or entire, but multiple, contradictory and contingent. Some of the theoretical implications of the absolutist position of the death of the subject is seen by several feminist critics as a threat to feminist politics (Benhabib 1992, Waugh 1992). They argue that while identity and subjectivity can no longer be premised on the autonomy and rationality or what previously constituted the foundation of identity, postmodernism has signalled not so much a death of the subject, as a radical re-definition and reconstitution of subjectivity (Benhabib1992). Since the challenge offered by post-modernism, in their reading, is to Enlightenment concepts of autonomy, rationality and agency, it should not be interpreted as a threat to female identity as the female self was never founded on these concepts (Watson and Smith 1992, 1998; Benstock1998). Rather, the notion of the discursive nature and
construction of subjectivity and identity, current in recent autobiographical theory
inflected by post-modernism, can prove fruitful for reading women’s autobiographies.
Thus, instead of foreclosing an exploration of subjectivity and identity, post-
modernism can enable an engagement and dialogue with autobiographical concepts in
a productive way that would be tenable for feminist hypothesis and politics (Gilmore

The problem of the subject in poststructuralist theory has been widely debated
elsewhere as well. There seems to be an inherent paradox here between the radical
“poststructuralist subject of epistemology, with its commitment to a nameless and a
open ended process” and the exigencies of political subjectivity which requires the
“determinate authority of names, identities and constituencies” (Radhakrishnan 1996,
2). Critics like Spivak and others have tackled the issue of grounding the subject for
political purposes without necessarily essentializing the subject, in different ways.
One approach is to take recourse to a “strategic essentialism” for political purposes
(Spivak 1987, De Lauretis 1986). These critics seem to show a way out of this
unbridgeable chasm between politics and history on one hand, and epistemology and
philosophy, on the other, by positing a feminist subject, which remains historically
specific “even as it envisions ongoing change along poststructuralist trajectories”
(Radhakrishnan 1996, 22).

By this account the much-repeated “death of the subject” is a result of a
misreading, which conflates “politics with epistemology”. The different
representations offered of the subject by structuralism and often carried over into
poststructuralism, is essentially epistemological rather than political, reinforcing the
point made earlier, about the problematic relationship of the epistemological or
theoretical subject to the political. This would appear to be a theoretical impasse
impossible to negotiate had it not been for some available instances of critiques,
which emanate from a combination of poststructuralist theory and a historical
understanding. Most of the work of cultural theorists like Partha Chatterjee and
Kumkum Sangari, as well as the work of the subaltern studies group of historians are
notable instances.

Further, the most recent and theoretically meaningful accounts of
autobiography, particularly feminist autobiography seems to be informed by a
consciousness of both the epistemological, as well as the historical/cultural aspect. To
look at such an account by a feminist critic, conscious of multiple strategies of self-presentation:

I offered ‘autobiographies’ to describe these elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine or the literary history or concept of the book which defines autobiography as a genre; instead, autobiography marks a location in the text where self invention, self discovery and self representation emerge within the technology of autobiographies, namely, those legalistic, literary, cultural and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced (Gilmore 1994, 85).

It is the changing subject and contours of autobiography and autobiographical studies that have been broadly outlined and mapped in the first chapter, “The Changing Contours of Autobiographical Studies”. The chapter briefly sketches how autobiography engages with several disciplinary and theoretical formulations derived from Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction and Structuralism, focusing particularly on feminism, women’s autobiographical writings and feminist critiques of autobiographies, as well as modulations and transformations in the field of autobiographical studies. This chapter closes in on some of the intellectual concerns of third wave feminism or postmodernist feminism particularly with reference to questions of difference. I also attempt, very briefly, to fill in the implications of the postmodern critique of difference feminism for autobiographical questions of subjectivity and identity. Further, the autobiographies of men and women in a colonial context and their sense of selfhood is permeated by the materiality and the ideology of the colonial context and, therefore, cannot be viewed in separation from it. This chapter also illustrates how the notion of a dispersed, fluctuating, shifting, and above all, discursively constructed selfhood – which covers the realm of the material, as well as of the ideological – offered by postmodernist interventions into autobiography, could prove enabling for reading early women’s autobiographies.

The next chapter discusses some aspects of the material, social and ideological context of mid and late nineteenth century Bengal, with particular reference to the issues of life writings and to questions of literacy, education and reform. I start with a brief sketch of how an oriental version of a script for the past, centring on traditional and Brahmanical patriarchies and sourced from scriptural texts which authorise these patriarchies, is initiated by Orientalist scholars and becomes a hegemonic one (Chakravarti 1989, Roy 1995). This chapter also gives a brief outline
of the embattled context of nineteenth century Bengal, with its intersecting histories of colonialism and the response of the Brahmanical patriarchy, the uneven and fractured progress of education and reform, especially with reference to middle class Bengali women. It also examines the prescriptive norms by which Bengali and Indian women were to be emancipated, according to the representatives and spokesmen of the reformulated patriarchies; and the trajectories along which newly educated Bengali women re-formed themselves in writing. I also take issue with the use of the notion or concept of ‘bhadramahila’ with reference to the autobiographies under scrutiny; all the “voices from within” (Karlekar 1991) did not emanate from the inner quarters of upper class households. A crucial point here is that if the concept of the ‘bhadramahila’ is a social construct, the notion of interiority implicit in “within” is an ideological construct shaped by the urgencies of a beleaguered patriarchy troubled by numerous changes and its challenges. The concept of interiority emanates from specific ideologies of domestic life, which were prevalent both in nineteenth century India and Britain.

The third chapter looks at the concepts of the self available to Rashsundari, Binodini, Haimabati and Sarala, under the rubric ‘sources of the self’. What are the sources or practices of the self in the autobiographical writings under scrutiny? Vaishnav hagiography and spiritualism, the theatrical medium, Brahmo ideas and practices, the practice of medicine and an incipient patriotism and nationalism formed the discursive basis on which the autobiographical self was located and articulated in these autobiographies. In the second part of this chapter, titled ‘Versions of the Self’, one observes the emergence of diverse self-constructions, modes of self-consciousness and self-perception in the autobiographical writings in question. The autobiographies challenge and interrogate ideas of agency and identity. A close reading often reveals striking reformulations of many autobiographical concepts. Issues of agency, volition and consciousness receive a degree of complexity since late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali women pronounce ‘I’ with great difficulty. Instead, the ‘I’ is constantly re-written and displaced into varying discursive domains, so that, in a sense, the moment of writing of the autobiographical self may well signal the moment of the ‘death’ of the actual self of the autobiographer (De Man1984).
The next chapter would focus on the body in the life writings discussed. How do these autobiographies represent and articulate the body? To what extent is interiority located in and conveyed through the medium of the body? In addition, how do the autobiographies in question view physical labour? At least three of the autobiographers attempted to work at a profession in the public sphere, while the fourth engaged in gruelling domestic labour. There is, in all the autobiographies under scrutiny, an interrogation of the gendered division of labour, conveyed in different ways and registers. Thus, at one level, both the concept of ‘bhadramahila’ and the concept of the ‘angel in the house’ so popular in representations of women in Victorian England, is questioned.

Further, several historians and social scientists (Chatterjee 1991; Chakrabarty 1990) refer to the thick web of discourses comprising the family (the domestic arena), community and the women’s question, in the late nineteenth century. They demonstrate how women figuratively become the ground on which debates on questions of identity, reform, modernity and nation are conducted. If that is so, and woman was the site on which anxieties about ‘national’ identity and differential modernity (Chakrabarty 1990) were articulated, how do women’s autobiographies negotiate the exigencies of personal and individual identity? Or is the ‘personal’ and ‘individual’ totally absorbed into the social? Often, there is a tension between the two, where notions of the self, subjectivity and agency have to be dredged out of a narrative of changing times, manners, customs and values. Further, how do the autobiographical writings in question view the family, community and the nation? While being wary of subsuming all life writings into the narrative of the nation, it still remains to investigate the interpenetration of women’s autobiographies with the issue of the emerging nationalist consciousness.

In the next chapter on structure, language and style, I focus on questions of narrative and textual strategies employed by the autobiographers, the images, tropes and figures used in the autobiographical writings under discussion. Women writers were quite often co-opted into adopting narrative strategies, which helped to mask/recast feelings of anger and protest into socially acceptable forms. I would also look at occasional incoherencies, silences and gaps in the concerned autobiographies. Also, according to the recent theoretical developments, language and style are often
performative and the autobiographical speaker/writers' self and subjectivity are fashioned through the performance of interiority (Butler 1990).

While it is tempting to view questions of the body, of language, style and structure as sites of resistance, urged by the needs and exigencies of feminist politics to re-site identity, we should see these entities as discursive terrains where acceptance and resistance are simultaneously located and articulated. At the same time, how can these personal narratives, implicated in multiple discourses of religious traditions, social reform, modernity and of the nation be recuperated in such a way that they offer spaces to read resistance and change?

The concluding section, 'Re-Siting Identity,' will sum up how notions of self and subjectivity are recast and how early women autobiographers write the self in new and unexpected ways, so as to emerge with a complex view of the issues of identity, selfhood and life writing.