

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we traced the trajectory of feminism in India as it has evolved through a complex interplay of colonial influence, nationalist aspirations, and post-independence democratic ideals. From the 19th-century reform movements centered on the “woman’s question” to contemporary feminist discourse rooted in intersectionality, women’s roles were often instrumentalized to symbolize progress and moral integrity. Radha Kumar distinguishes between feminism shaped by colonial rule and that shaped by democracy, with themes like modernity, development, and democracy recurring throughout. Early reformists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, influenced by both colonial critique and religious texts, sought to abolish sati and promote widow remarriage—though ironically, both reforms often reinforced Brahmanical patriarchy and were of limited practical impact. The Gandhian era brought women into political life, albeit in roles that often reinforced traditional gender binaries. Post-independence feminism initially placed faith in constitutional rights, but disillusionment in the 1970s led to a shift in focus toward issues like gendered violence, labor, and bodily autonomy. Events like the Shah Bano case exposed the limitations of universal legal remedies, emphasizing the need to account for caste, religion, and class. Feminist thinkers such as Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti highlighted the dangers of homogenizing womanhood and stressed the importance of recognizing “multiple and overlapping patriarchies.” Thus, Indian feminism’s journey reflects a tension between symbolic representation and actual empowerment, demanding nuanced approaches to gender justice that embrace diversity and difference.

In this lecture we will talk about Women’s Autobiographies and Identity Formation. In Anglo-American feminist theory, women’s autobiographies are recognized as a significant mode of rewriting dominant narratives about their experiences. These narratives challenge conventional ideas about gender and highlight the collective nature of women’s lives, which often cannot be reduced to the individualistic model traditionally associated with male autobiographies. Barbara Johnson observes that female autobiographers “resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, [and] . . . describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminist, imagination” (Johnson, p. 154). This suggests that women’s autobiographies serve as sites of negotiation and resistance, offering alternative ways of understanding identity formation.

Autobiographical narratives often foreground the socially constructed nature of identity, revealing two competing images of women: one imposed by dominant social structures and another that emerges from women’s own experiences and self-perceptions. Sheila Rowbotham describes this internal conflict:

“But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, were

always in transit, immigrants into alien territory. . . . The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being-woman” (Rowbotham, p. 31).

This division highlights the tension between how women are culturally defined and how they perceive themselves outside those prescriptions. Susan Friedman conceptualizes this as a conflict between “the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription” (Friedman, p. 75). However, Rowbotham also sees potential in this split, arguing that it creates space for a “new consciousness” that allows women to actively engage in self-definition. This idea parallels W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness,” which describes the way Black individuals navigate their identity within a dominant white culture. Similarly, Rowbotham’s analysis of women’s invisibility and silencing within patriarchal structures reveals how marginalized identities experience alienation. This heightened awareness of alienation, in turn, propels autobiographical narratives from the margins to reclaim agency through negotiation and resistance.

This lecture on Indian women’s autobiographies examines how the identity of the ‘Indian woman’ has been historically constructed and how Indian women have actively shaped their own self-representations. The bifurcation of identity along gendered lines became especially pronounced during the colonial period, as social reform movements sought to define the ideal ‘Indian woman’—one who would embody modernity and independence without adopting Western values. J. Devika (2008) describes this as the ‘order of gender,’ a structured system that maintained clear distinctions between male and female roles. In this framework, men occupied the public sphere—political, economic, and intellectual—while women were expected to assume the role of efficient homemakers and ideal companions to men (Chatterjee, 1989).

Women’s education during this time was aimed at shaping them into “idealized modern gendered subjectivities” (Devika, 2008, p. 139). The modern woman, though seemingly freed from traditional constraints, was ultimately positioned as “culled out of the traditional order” (ibid) and redefined as “free from bondage to tradition” (ibid). However, this freedom was conditional—it required women to maintain their roles as “guardians of the home and hearth . . . in a relation of complementarity with Man” (ibid). This paradox reveals how women’s autonomy was both encouraged and constrained within nationalist discourse.

The nineteenth century provides a critical lens for analyzing the construction of the ‘Indian woman.’ On one hand, prescriptive texts were written to instruct young, educated women on proper conduct (Karlekar, p. 12), reinforcing societal expectations of femininity defined by chastity, obedience, and docility. On the other hand, women themselves began documenting their life experiences, offering alternative perspectives on femininity and selfhood. This contrast between the “official construction of femininity” (Karlekar, ibid) and personal narratives demonstrates that the identity of the ‘Indian woman’ has never been a fixed or monolithic category.

Autobiographical writings by Indian women across different historical periods illuminate both the dominant social constructions of femininity and the ways in which women have negotiated, resisted, and redefined these norms. Their life narratives reveal strategies of self-fashioning and self-reconstruction that challenge imposed definitions of gender roles. By engaging with these texts, we gain a deeper understanding of how women’s autobiographies serve as critical interventions, complicating and contesting traditional notions of identity.

Rasasundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (1876), emerged at a crucial moment in the nationalist reconstruction of the 'Indian woman.' Nineteenth-century male writers and critics praised the work for staying within the prescribed boundaries of the 'private' and for reflecting concerns about women's education, which played a key role in shaping the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman). Jyotirindranath Tagore, in his introduction, validated the book by stating that despite being written by a woman, it was worth reading. In a second introduction, Dinesh Chandra Sen further reinforced this assessment, writing: "This autobiography should not be ignored as a personal narrative. It is an authentic portrait of an old Hindu woman. Through her simple writing, she presents a picture of the society. *Amar Jiban* is not just about Rasasundari; it is the story of all Hindu women." Rasasundari was thus praised for embodying the qualities of a 'true modern Hindu woman'—a devoted homemaker, deeply religious, and keenly interested in education.

The autobiography negotiates with the constructed national identity of the 'Indian woman.' Partha Chatterjee (1993) suggests that nineteenth-century autobiographies prioritized "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 the personality" (138). For women like Rasasundari, writing an autobiography was an act of reclaiming citizenship denied under colonial rule. This reclamation involved restructuring the world into two spheres: the outer material world, associated with colonial rule, and the inner spiritual world, which became the site for forging an indigenous identity through nationalist discourse. As Suchitra Mathur explains, "since this nationalist ideology was inscribed primarily on the body of the woman, who was deliberately re-fashioned during this period to become the embodiment of an inviolable 'Indian' identity, the notion of subjectivity in women's autobiography was tied, even more so than in the men's, to the life of the nation" (47-48).

Despite the nationalist framework shaping women's life narratives, these autobiographies did not always conform to patriarchal nationalism. Vina Mazumdar notes that while nineteenth-century women's autobiographies primarily portrayed women as 'observers' rather than active participants in social change (Mazumdar, x), their writings often challenged prevailing gender ideologies. She asserts that these texts urged readers "for a fresh look at the social ideology and gender relations of 'an unequal stratified society'" (ibid). Feminist scholars have thus interpreted these works as portraying an alternative image of the 'Indian woman' distinct from dominant cultural representations.

Feminist readings of *Amar Jiban* highlight its engagement with issues such as marriage and education from a woman's perspective. Malavika Karlekar examines Rasasundari's redefinition of the *antahpur* (the secluded inner space of women) as a site of agency. Through her autobiographical self, Rasasundari transforms the *antahpur* from a space of confinement into one of negotiation with the outer world. Karlekar argues that Rasasundari defies *antahpur* restrictions in two ways: by comparing it to a "prison" and by seeking knowledge of God (Parameshwar), which leads her to engage in forbidden activities such as reading and writing. Similarly, Tanika Sarkar (1999) observes that Rasasundari's invocation of God underscores the 'social making' of gender roles that confined women. Sarkar notes that while Rasasundari describes social structures as part of "God's design," she also recognizes their constructed nature. Sarkar highlights that Rasasundari directly addresses a modern readership already debating issues like women's education, restrictive traditions, domestic labor, and motherhood. She writes, "On certain issues, [Rasasundari] speaks in a declamatory voice, where she describes the painful consequences of social regulations. She, clearly, is addressing a modern readership here which is already debating these matters: on women's education,

about the restrictions of old times, about the relentless pressure of domestic labour, the problems of motherhood” (Sarkar, 1999, 220).

Rasasundari’s autobiography reflects a deep awareness of gender inequality. She writes: “At that time women did not get education. After the work in the house and lunch, the little bit of time that was left, women were supposed to stand very meekly near the karta of the house. As if women did not have any other work. At that time people used to treat women like this. Especially there was a rule for wives that they will have to wear a foot-long veil and work in the house. She was considered a very good wife if she refrained from speaking to anybody. At that time the clothes were not soft like now – they were thick. I used to wear such clothes and draw my veil till my chest and work. I never used to speak to anyone else. Like the oil-churning ox, our eyes were always covered. We could not see anything except for our own feet. These kind of rules prevailed the entire life of the wives. I, too, followed them (29).”

Feminist interpretations of *Amar Jiban* emphasize its redefinition of the ‘Indian woman,’ particularly in domesticity, marriage, and education. While Rasasundari challenges norms by learning to read and write, she does not necessarily disrupt the public/private divide. Karlekar argues that Rasasundari’s agency lies in transforming the *antahpur* into a space of negotiation with the outer world. However, Rasasundari does not physically leave the *antahpur*; her resistance remains within the domestic sphere, where she secretly reads Chaitanya Bhagwat. Her invocation of God serves a dual purpose—justifying her desire for knowledge while keeping her within socially acceptable boundaries.

Despite critiquing patriarchal restrictions, Rasasundari upholds gender hierarchies within her family. She repeatedly emphasizes that her educational journey, though initially solitary, was ultimately completed with her sons' guidance. She also domesticates education, stating that its purpose is not material gain but self-exploration (*Amar Jiban*, 57).

Moreover, *Amar Jiban* universalizes the ‘Indian woman,’ adhering to nationalist ideals that predominantly reflected upper-caste, upper-class women. Chatterjee (1989) notes that nationalist constructions of the ‘new woman’ relied on binaries of home/world, spiritual/material, which excluded lower-class and lower-caste women. Sumanta Banerjee critiques this exclusion, observing that the focus on *antahpur* life erases working-class women such as “sweepers, vegetable sellers, street singers and dancers, and maidservants” (129). Rasasundari, from an upper-caste landlord family, enjoys class privilege; she notes that women working outside the home brought ‘shame’ upon their families (*Amar Jiban*, 56-57). Chatterjee (1989) further argues that nationalist ideology contrasted the ‘new woman’ with the ‘common woman,’ who was portrayed as “coarse, vulgar, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, [and] subjected to brutal physical oppression by males” (244-245).

Thus, both *Amar Jiban* and its feminist readings have tended to universalize ‘Indian woman’ as a singular category, overlooking class and caste differences. While Rasasundari’s autobiography provides critical insights into women’s struggles, it also reinforces the dominant nationalist construction of womanhood.

In the next lecture we will do further literary analysis.