

The 19th Century India : As Represented In Non-Fictional Writing of 19th Century Women

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Abstract: Virginia Woolf concedes 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' and supporting her Linda Williams also emphasizes that women need to think matrilineally and patriarchal thinking has become a primary feminist concern. So, when history is in question, women's writings can play an unparalleled role to shift the patriarchal paradigm. The nineteenth century is marked by some historical incidents that shaped the modern India. Year 1829 is significant for the Abolition of Suttee Rites as a result of a movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Year 1835 is important for Macaulay's infamous minutes on introducing Western system of education in India. Year 1849 is also important for the establishment of Bethune opening the door of liberal education for women. 1856 is the year when Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed. This research paper focuses on the representation of the socio-political-literary-cultural scenario of the 19th century India as recorded in non-fictional writings of the 19th century women. The paper takes as its subject 19th century women's autobiography, memoir, essay, travelogue, and letter. The paper mainly looks for women's view of the picture of 19th century family, society, status of female education, issues of marriage and domestic violence, purdah etc. In doing so women's writing from 18th century or 20th century will also be used as relevant references. Non-fictional writing of women across the sea may also be referred to support the argument. The paper will also mention some men's response to women's initiative in the public world.

Introduction

Female autobiography and memoir are testimony to the oppressions women have been subjected to, but more importantly, their struggles and resistance against oppression. It has often been noted how women have been the self-appointed custodians of traditional practices. It was

at the initiative of her tradition – upholding mother and grand-mother – that a girl child is subjugated. Linda R. Williams in "Happy Families? Feminist Reproduction and Matrilineal Thought" anthologized in *Feminist Literary Theory* edited by Mary Eagleton (1996) quotes Woolf's famous statement 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' to emphasize the recovery of an intellectual patriarchy. Williams also mentions Woolf's opinion that feminists should 'think back through our mothers'. As Woolf thought that there is a literary history which works matrilineally, William thinks, "Matriarchal thinking has become a primary feminist characteristic" (Eagleton, 1996:54). From Vinay Lal's review of Antoinette Burton's *Dwelling in the Archive : Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (2003) we understand that in this book Burton has given us observations crucial to our study. To Burton the memoirs of women represent reliable evidence for history. She examined the very different kinds of writings produced by three Indian women from colonial and postcolonial time and claimed that 'Domestic space' represented 'politicized space' in colonial India.

Background

The nineteenth century is marked by some historical incidents that shaped the modern India. Year 1829 is significant for the Abolition of Suttee Rites as a result of a movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833). Year 1835 is important for Macaulay's infamous minutes on introducing Western system of education in India. 1856 is the year when Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed with the strong effort of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). Men thinkers of the time were thinking anew of women's position in society and their roles in family. In the East the men have their own peculiar type of thoughts on Woman's Question. Let us start with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, one of the most vocal men in Woman's Question, who says,

When have you tested women's intelligence that you call them foolish? If you offer someone education and knowledge and he fails to internalize and implement then you can call him/her blockhead; but you have hardly provided women folk with education and knowledge and still absurdly sure of their being idiot/nerd (quoted in Choudhury, 2003 : 25).

Next comes the name of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who boldly expresses, "Do you think being widow makes female body free of

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desire? Doesn't she feel pain? ...do all the carnal desires die with the husband? Your verdict is absolutely wrong" (quoted in Pradhan, 2000 : 151). It was a time which can be defined by Engel's wise observation that the man has to be the earner, the breadwinner of the family, and this gives him a dominating position which requires no special legal privileges. In the family, he is the bourgeois, the wife represents the proletariat.

Yet, 19th century has produced women of substance in literature and politics. Katherine Frank in *INDIRA: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* portrays an authentic picture of the troubled time and women's role in it. She writes,

In the early years of the nationalist struggle women like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu were anomalies – honorary men in the Congress. But now, 'an avalanche' of women 'took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise...women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working – class women, rich women – pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. (Frank, 2005 : 62)

Frank informs us that among those, were the Nehru women, especially Kamala who rose from her sick bed, put on a white Khadi Congress volunteer uniform, and went out to picket foreign cloth and liquor stores, government schools and courts. Frank adds, "Kamala's physical ailments and lassitude disappeared or were ignored by her. Much later Nehru realized that she had been longing "to play her own part in the national struggle and not be merely a hanger – on and a shadow of her husband", but it was only in the early months of 1930, he said, that "I sensed her desire and we worked together and I found in this experience a new delight. Children, as well as women, clamored for a role" (Frank, 2005:62). He informs us how Kamala made a speech in Hyderabad in which she urged women to come out of purdah. Indira was deeply impressed by her mother's performance. But she did not as yet understand Nehru's wife feminism, having never herself experienced any disadvantage being a girl. Nor did Indira see any oppression of women around her. Certainly not in Hyderabad where they stayed with the Congress leader Sarojini Naidu who, along with her daughter Leila Mani and Padmaja, was an intelligent, forceful and charismatic woman.

Text Discussion

To do the present research women's non-fictional writings are collected from their letters to different periodicals, essays, autobiographies, travelogues, interviews and so on. In the 18th century Lakshmi-Mani Debi was the first woman to rise voice against the deplorable condition of women through her writing. From Golam Murshid's admirable work *Rash-Sundari theke Ruquaiya*, we come to know that in 1868 she wrote an article titled "Poradhinotar Ki Kosto"/ "The Plight of Captivation". Though Murshid does not quote Lakshmi-Mani Debi he sums up the essay in following words, "There is no limit of the pain and plight of the women who are not independent" (quoted in Murshid, 2013 : 12). It is interesting that at that tradition-bound time a Bengali woman could voice out that women are caged and captivated. Lakshmi-Mani holds the social customs responsible for the dehumanized position of women. We will notice that this motif of caged bird or captivation will recur again and again throughout the centuries in women's writing. Sarmistha Sen (2007) informs us that Lakshmi -Mani Debi, herself a widow, married off her widow daughter Kalimati (1846-1859) to a widower Srish Chandra Vidyaratna (1831-1893) in 1856. It was the first widow marriage.

The research gets its force from the powerful words of the marginalized women. We get an intense picture of the confined and subjugated life of women in 19th century India through the autobiography of Rash- Shundari Dasi/Debi (1810-99), the first woman to write autobiography. In her autobiography titled *Amar Kotha* (1283/1876) she writes, "Today I am sixty", this means she has started the writing in 1870 but the date of publication is Bengali 1283 or English year 1876. She boldly opines about women's dignity in men's eyes in following words, "The wretched women of that times were comparable to animals. In case a woman is seen with a piece of paper in hand, the elderly women were petrified" (quoted in Murshid, 2013 : 27). Through this statement we also notice how women themselves had internalized the man-made limitations and to some extent had themselves become the spokesman of patriarchy. Rash-Sundari further comments on women's position in society by saying, "At that time women had no freedom at all ... she used to live like a caged bird" (quoted in Murshid, 2013 : 42). This East Bengal housewife writing the first Bengali prose autobiography in the second half of the nineteenth

century, comments in a place of her autobiography that even her children would not be able to understand the prohibitory shrinking's that formed their mother's consciousness. In a remarkable passage, she describes herself as retreating to an inner room to avoid being seen by her husband's horse when it came into the courtyard to be fed. Astonishingly, "Rassundari (1809-1900) learns to read at the age of twenty-five and to write at fifty" (Ghoshal, 2011 : 181). She describes her veiled existence, "I used to do all the household chores veiling my face; I neither was seen nor saw anyone through that veil ... like the eye-tide bull that runs the mustard-grinder ... what else could I do being a mere caged bird!" (Roy, 2012 : 1). About the in-laws she writes, "I used to be like their pet bird ... I used to be taken care like a pet bird" (Murshid, 2013 : 40) and "What else I could do? Am not a caged bird?" (Murshid, 2013 : 41).

Nistarini Debi (1833-1916) was also a 19th century woman who regularly wrote in Bama-Bodhini Patrika. Some of her ideas are really thought provoking, for example to promote female education she writes, "To run the household flawlessly is the main duty of a woman ... that call for a great intelligence. ... That intelligence comes from proper education. Therefore, there cannot be an alternative to female education" (quoted in Roy, 2012 : 93). She also voiced the plight of women and writes strongly, "There is no record of how many pious, virtuous women are oppressed by alcoholic, whore-monger husbands" (quoted in Roy, 2012 : 95). She voices against child marriage and early-motherhood by saying, "These days child mothers are begetting unhealthy children, and they lack knowledge of rearing children" (quoted in Roy, 2012 : 95).

Next comes the name of Kailash-Bashini Debi (1837) who was born three decades after Ras-Sundari Debi and authored a book on women's degraded status in family and society. This woman was married at twelve (in 1849) an early age and was bound to learn to read and write being forced by her English-taught husband Durgacharan Gupta. We know from Golam Murshhid's abovementioned book that Kailash Bashini, though herself not *Kulin*, has criticized the patronizing nature of *Kulin* system and condemns it for causing unspeakable suffering in the life of innumerable *kulin* women. Murshid informs us that she has also discussed child-marriage, polygamy and depravity of the widows in her writing. Her first published book is titled *Hindu Mohilagoner*

Dinobostha (1875)/*The De-Humanized Hindu Women*. She was so much annoyed with the *Purdah*-system that she disclaims the system saying that it was a Muslim legacy and must have been adopted from the Nawab's practice (Murshid, 2013 : 18-19). At a time like this, Kailash Bashini sounds anomaly. She informs us, "If a girl-child was born to any family, the mother herself would sob to see the new born girl let alone other relatives" (Murshid, 2013 : 54). Like Rash-Sundari, she also uses the metaphor of 'caged bird' to express the suffocating life of Bengali women, "The way birds and animals are caged, women also suffocate breathless, and always think of the father's home as their free space... Therefore, the husband's home remains ever as '*porebari*' or someone else's home to her" (Murshid, 2013 : 55). It is also interesting that a woman of that time, when in-law's place was their ultimate address after marriage, a woman dares to call it '*porebari*' or 'Other's House'-something that does not belong to her or somewhere she does not belong to where the husband is por /other or not apon/your own. From Murshid's analysis we know that Kailashbashini Debi wrote another book titled *Hindu Obolakuler Vidyabhash O Tahar Somunnoti* (1887) that in a marital relationship if one person is superior and the other inferior, then the former will, in all probability be contemptuous and brush aside the other. She also thinks there should be no marriage unless the husband and wife are both equal because there can be no unity unless both are equal because there can be no unity unless both are equal and without it love cannot be achieved. Kailashbashini Debi expressed her grief being 'widow', "That word came like a thunderbolt on my heart. Oh, God! Why did you adorn me with this curse? I cannot bear that...the very sound of the word scares me" (Sen, 2007 : 13). Like Kailashbashini, we also find Nagendrabala Mustafi who protests against the *purdah* system. In "Oborodh E Hinabostha"/ "Plight of *Purdah*", a feature published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1302 Nagendrabala Mustafi writes, "We do not like the *purdah* system of our present society. This is responsible for our degraded social status. Like a caged-bird, we are constantly captivated and so, all our potentialities are gradually dying" (Roy, 2012 : 184).

At this stage we must mention Krishna-Bhabini Dasi (1864) who was the first woman to write a travelogue. Her observations during her visit to England are published as *England E Banga-Mahila* (1885). She has observed the stark difference between women in home and abroad.

Interestingly we did not find any from Jnanadanandini Debi who first visited England in 1864. More importantly, *England E Banga-Mahila* is not merely another *Europe Prabashir Patra* written from a woman's point of view; rather it re-defines the idea of *sati/chaste* woman and the status of wife as *ardhangi/better half*. Golam Murshid quotes her following words that display wisdom, profound analytical ability and understanding of human nature. Moreover, for a woman of her age it demands an ocean of courage to write, "Those women who are chaste in this country are, to my thinking, the real pure women; because many women can take pride in their chastity without experiencing exposure to men outside of family, but those who interact with men apart from the family and still remain pure are worth of praise" (quoted in Murshid, 2013 : 103). But the book was banned for being pro-woman. "Krishna Bhabini Dasi published her travelogue in pen-name (using a man's name) but the book was banned for being pro-woman" (Ghoshal, 2011 : 186).

To maintain the chronology, I find it imperative to mention Haimabati (1866-1932). Indira Sen in her article "Resisting Patriarchy: Complexities and Conflicts in the Memoir of Haimabati Sen" published in *Economic and Political Weekly* mentions some important clues to the time of Haimabati (1866-1932) who after becoming a child-widow in the 1870s, remarried, studied and eventually became a lady doctor. We know that by the 19th century, the position of women in upper caste Hindu society had badly declined and they were subjected to wide ranging oppressive practices. Married at 9 to a sick *kulin* of 45 years and widowed at 11 Haimabati had to go through strict austerity widows are entitled to observe. Initially, her mother-in-law called her 'an ogress' who had 'eaten up' her son and made the dazed child-widow observe austerities: "I was not supposed to oil my hair at that time. For ten or twelve days I had to eat boiled rice I cooked myself" (Sen, 2016). Several others – including her mother and grand-mother – blamed her literacy for her widowhood. She recalls how one relative commented: "Everybody knew that she would be widowed if she learned to read and write" (59). Haimabati now suffered the typical widow's fate of physical deprivation and dispossession of property for a drunkard and whoremonger husband. As a consequence, from her depiction we visualize the peril of widows who were de-sexualized in the "widow's garb" (which in Bengal, was a white colored dhoti), with

heads sheared, widows had to eat spartanly, refrain from consuming fish (a great deprivation for a fish-eating community) and observe fasts (*bratas*) and penances. The banning of "heating" foods (e.g., onions, garlic, *masoor dal* or red lentils) as well as non-vegetarian food items (e.g., fish, meat, eggs) was meant to control the widow's sexual urges, since these foods supposedly inflamed sexual passions.

So far, we have seen that the image of caged bird recurs again and again in different women's writing from different decades and things are nearly unchanged even in twentieth century. From Sarmistha Sen we come to know that a woman writer, Kalyani Dutta wrote a book titled *From the Cage* (1996) where few wretched widows' inhuman suffering is recorded. Even men could understand the situation too well. Satyendranath Tagore, being a liberated man, could feel the suffocation felt by his wife in *purdah* and wrote to her from England, "You are now caged like a bird. Your body and mind are not free. Come to this land [England], you will get a freer life" (quoted in Murshid, 2013 : 75).

So far only Hindu women are mentioned because In British India the Hindu were more eager to educate themselves than the Muslims who preferred Urdu and Pury to English and Bangla. In a time like this was born Ruquaiya who is the pioneer of Muslim women in education. In "Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl" Ruquaiya Sakhawat Hussein (2002) writes :

The state of the education of women in India has for long centuries been deplorable. In the early Aryan period women held a position of authority and honour. We are told in the Upanishads of women who took part in deep discussion on philosophical truths and authorship of some Vedic hymn is ascribed to them. Yet even in the *Rigg Veds* there are indications that women were coming to be looked down upon as inferior beings who should remain in subjection to men (p. 25).

Purabi Basu informs us in *Nari Dipabali that Famous 19th century actress Binodini, known as Nati Binodini, also wrote her autobiography Amar Kotha* along with two books of poetry. Though Basu has not provided any extracts from Binodini's writing. Basu also informs us that Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani (1834), famous scholar and social-worker of 19th century was provided the best education possible at home by her liberal father. She, along with her sister, was tutored home by famous scholars, about this she writes, "As a girl I used to stop

all my jovialities and concentrated on my studies when the teachers used to come” (Basu, 2015:246). I find a glimpse of the 19th century Muslim family from here. Later Faizunnesa left her husband in 1873 as a protest of his ill-treatment of her. But her life continues with more enlightening endeavors. She established an English school for girls in 1897 and also a hospital. More interestingly, she wrote an autobiographical novel named *Roop-jalal* in 1876.

Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) a contemporary of Tagore, a poet from aristocratic Muslim family, a teacher at Kolkata Corporation School, informed us about the time, “At that time to write Bengali was an offence on part of Muslim women from respectable families. Among the women who broke the taboo and cultivated Bengali literature bravely, the names of Begum Ruquaiya, Poet Motahera Banu, Sara Taifur came first. They were our idols for literary creativity. I consider Begum Ruquaiya the lighthouse of my life” (quoted in Bhuiyan, 1995 : 33).

The 19th century Bengali society was represented and reshaped by the progressive the Tagore of the Jorasanko Thakur-Bari. This family had a gallery of gifted women who have captured the changing time in their writings. In *Thakur-barir Andar-Mahal* Chitra Deb has mentioned many women from the historical family who have written memoirs, autobiographies and letters that paint the age authentically. For instance, the moment Jnanadanandini Debi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore returned to Calcutta after spending two years in Bombay is brilliantly recorded in Swarnakumari’s memoir that makes it clear that nobody offered a warm welcome to Jnanadanandini Debi on the day of her return. The fourth and most brilliant daughter of Maharshi wrote, “The expression of grief was deep as the daughter-in-law was getting down from car like a memsahib...Tears rolled down from the eyes of all the old servants of the house” (quoted in Deb, 2007 : 20) as if Jnanadanandini Debi has committed an unforgivable sin being out of zenana. In fact, the 19th century society believed that institutional education was not women’s cup of tea. Soudamini Debi, the eldest daughter of Devendranath Tagore wrote, “It was very difficult to get students when Bethune School was first established in Calcutta. My father sent me and my cousin sister to study there. Mr. Hardev Chatterjee sent his two daughters...Mr. Madanmohan Torkalongkar also sent his daughters. This way with very few students Bethune

School started to function” (quoted in Deb, 2007 : 14). Bethune was established in 1849 and was famous creating curious females who wanted to learn more. That is why Bethune students were harshly mocked by contemporary, anti-enlightenment poets like Ishwar Gupta. From Chitra Dev we come to know that people began to write satires about those distracted or so-called Bethune-educated girls:

‘Swadhinzenana (Independent Wife), *PashkoraMaag* (Surpassed Wife), *Shikkhito Bou*(Educated Wife), *Maag-mukho Chhele* (female-faced male), *Srijukta Bou-bibi* (European Lady with the Title ‘Shree’), *Pash-kora Adure Bou* (Surpassed Affectionate Wife), *Kolir Meye* (*girl of the fallen age*) & *Pondit Meye* (Intelligent Wife), *Fochke Chhurir Kirtikando* (The Tale of the Frivolous Girl), *Hurko Bou-er Bishomjwala*, *Kolir Bou Harjalani*, *Maagshorboshwa*, *Behadya Behaya* and so on. The topic and summary of each satire were the same ‘all are gone to dogs’. These satires had been written for fifty years. Even till the beginning of twentieth century. (Deb, 2007 : 14).

He never ridiculed Loretto girls as Loretto was a center for creating good housewife. That is why Devendranath sent his daughter to Bethune and daughter-in-law (Mrinalini Debi) to Loretto house. Through this we find a glimpse of the condition of female education in the 19th century. We also find memoir from Janodanandini who wrote, “Once the profits from jurisdiction of the state of *zamindars* decreased. My father-in-law sent a message to all the daughters-in-law to learn cooking” (quoted in Deb, 2007 : 31). Chitra Deb also quotes Soudamini who wrote almost the same words, “For our cooking-lessons we had to prepare one dish per day. We used to get one take each day for buying fish and vegetables for cooking” (Deb, 2007 : 31).

Moreover, the practice of shutting the female folk in Andar-mahal/antapur/zenana was one of the most abominable practices of the 19th century men. Innumerable women died of tuberculosis and many un-identified diseases caused by the dismaying atmosphere of these female quarters. From *Smriti-kotha*, a memoir written by Mira Debi, Tagore’s youngest daughter we come to know how Mrinalini Debi suffered in this type of atmosphere. Meera Debi writes, “Because of the palatial home of Gaganda [Gaganendranath Tagore] in front of our house there was hardly any air in our place. There was no electricity fan. The only means was the handmade [manual] fan. Mother suffered a lot in that air-less suffocating home while she was ill” (Debi, 2011 :

20). Even, some women of Tagore family have written memoir of the World Poet and given us glimpses of history. For example, Pratima Debi, wife of Rathindranath Tagore and was daughter-in-law of the Bard was his most earnest nurse and caregiver till his last breath. From her memoir *Nirvan (2015)* we are informed that, "He preferred nursing from women. He used to say, 'women are of *mother-kind*, nursing suits them best" (Debi, 2015:28). She also let us know that, "He did not like nursing from everyone's hand. To be a nurse whom he would appreciate, one needs some qualities: his/her touch would be soft, he/she should be intelligent enough to understand him on his [Tagore's] slightest hint, and the nurse should be a cheerful, smart person with a balanced sense of humor" (Debi, 2015 : 27).

Interestingly, women outside of the Tagore family in relation but very close to Rabindranath Tagore from within, have also written a number of memoirs about him. In this list Rani Chanda's name comes first for her three useful and pragmatic memoirs / records of conversation with Tagore on different aspects of life. She has written two memoirs: *Alapchari Rabindranath* and *Gurudev*. In *Alapchari Rabindranath* Chanda records Tagore's conversation from 1938-1941. For example, on 17 January 1938, Tagore said to Rani Chanda "After all, it must be admitted that, men's build is different from women's. Men's brain and physical strength are more superior. Say, If I were my Na'Didi [Swarna Kumari] would I be able to come up to this present status of mine? Let alone the social barriers, women's brain can never work this much" (Chanda, 2015 : 41). The statement not only reveals Tagore's view of women in general but his under estimation of his talented sister in particular. Beside Rani Chanda, we can mention Sister Nivedita and Maitreyee Debi's memoirs in this respect. Chitra Deb also mentions Sister Nivedita's memoir where Nivedita wrote about Tagore's niece Sarala Debi Choudhurani, an active Congress member, "He [Swami Vivekananda] says, 'Sarala is the jewel of the womenfolk; she will do great...Sarala has perfect education. Every woman in India should receive this extent of education" (Deb, 2007 : 112).

If we follow 19th century women's letters and essays published in different journals and periodical of that time we will get not only an authentic picture of the society but hear the protesting voice of women. *Bamabodhini Patrika* was a great platform for women to write. Though mainly middle class, upper-middle class, Brahmo women used

to write in it. *Nari o Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika* compiled and edited by Bharati Roy records many letters and news on women's issues published in *Bamabodhini Patrika*. For example, an article written by some anonymous writer is worth mentioning in this respect. The article is titled "Amadiger Narijatir Obostha" dated Sraavan 1281 (1877) which describes the deplorable condition and marginal position of women in that society; it writes, "Their childhood passes in negligence, they peril in widowhood, they suffer as wife, and ill-treated at old age. Considering the facts, we can realize in what humiliation they pass their days. Their whole life is wet with tears. As a child, she is a burden on her parents, in youth- overprotected by the husband, and at old age treated indignantly by children" (Roy, 2012 : 66). The untimely death of so female characters in Tagore's fiction and most importantly, his wife and two daughters are no exceptions in this respect. Sarada Debi from Muzaffar-pur writes in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1273, "If a man's remarrying after his wife's death is not a sin, why then would it be so in case of helpless widows?" (quoted in Sen, 2007 : 77).

Regarding the practice of *Andar-mahal/zenana*, the secluded place in home for women where male was hardly allowed but for the closest one like father, brother, son & husband. *BongeNari Nirjaton O Narir Utthan* edited by Shukla Ghoshal records many news of the condition of women in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. The following writing published in "Probashi", a then-distinguished newspaper seems worth of mention :

What is happening in the name of social value, culture and convention is utterly unkind. In Kolkata and other cities, the rate of female death is much higher than that of male. This is why the health-workers of Kolkata call it the city of killed mothers. The reasons behind the massive untimely death of our women are living perpetually in damp, dark, dismaying close quarters, child-motherhood, unhealthy labor rooms where women deliver child and are kept for post-delivery rest, lack of healthy food in post-pregnancy stage, noticeable negligence towards proper treatment and care for the ill women, and such inhuman attributes. (Ghoshal, 2011 : 12).

At one-point women's writing expanded from personal (autobiography, memoir, travelogue) to more public forum, like literary criticism or reader's response letter. For example, in response to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's essay "Prachina O Nabina" (1879), Sreemati Chandika Sundari (most likely to be the pen name) writes, "Has he [the essayist]

thought that the weakling women would not refute what he has written?" (Chattopadhyay, 2010 : 221). She continues, "You have learnt English, but what good has come out of it? You are only trained to be clerks...you are the worshipper of alcohol" (quoted in Chattopadhyay, 2010 : 221). Sree Lakshmi Muni too writes, "What harm have the women folk done to you? We know we are already guilty first because we are women second because we are born in Bengali family. Aren't these guilt enough?" (quoted in Chattopadhyay, 2010 : 221).

Tagore's opinion on female education is nowhere so vividly expressed as in "Stree Shiksha" (1915) which he wrote in response to a letter from some Leela Mitra who argued that women should be educated for their own sake not to be merely good housewife or mother, "A group of men forbid women's education on the ground that educated women will not worship their husband; another group prescribes education for women so that they can be proper mate to their educated husband...both the groups selfish as none prioritize what women really need- education that will enlighten them" (Tagore, 2008 : 286).

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) — who challenged more directly the new role model of educated but complaint wives. She was a Brahman woman who remained unmarried for a long time; she was well versed in the ancient shastras, married a man from a Sudra caste defying the restrictions on hypergamy, then became a widow with an infant daughter, refused to withdraw herself from public life, went to England to study medicine, and there converted to Christianity, went to America and raised money for a widow's home in Bombay which was later shifted to Poona. As she asserted her independent choice and crossed the boundaries that Indian patriarchy had set on the freedom of women, she was equally criticized by the reformers and dammed by the conservatives, as both considered her to be a social threat. In 1889 she gave a lecture which caused the huge outrage among the men present there. She said, "Women are equal to men in all respects except for drinking alcohol" (quoted in Pal, 2010 : 118). And Rabindranath Tagore wrote his most infamous, often-quoted letter in response to Rama Bai's speech where he writes, "If women are equal to men in all respects, then almighty has done much injustice to men folk" (Tagore, 2008 : 678). He adds, "Women are superior to men in some respect, for example, their physical and mental beauty...women

are less intelligent than men" (Tagore, 2008 : 678) which sound very sexist. He further questions women's creative faculty saying, "There is no woman born yet who could be a great poet" (Tagore, 2008 : 678). He believes women have one kind of common sense he terms as '*sahaj-buddhi*' in many places of his work, "Women have ability to adapt or perceive but not to think critically...women have a quickness of mind, but not strength of intelligence" (Tagore, 2008 : 679). At one point he expresses his belief in biological determinism, "In all respect it is the nature's demand that women cannot do men's job...only passing exam does not make women intellectually equal to men" (Tagore, 2008:679). Like other places of his work, Tagore emphasizes on the physical vulnerability of women saying, "due to her physical vulnerability she has to be at home and therefore depend on men" (Tagore, 2008 : 680). On issue of domestic violence, he writes, "If any husband insults his innocent wife, it does not disgrace her, rather, it enhances her grace...devotion to husband is the real duty of women" (Tagore, 2008 : 680).

Conclusion

However, no man's criticism could stop women from going ahead. Following the footsteps of the 19th century women, Sarojini Naidu dares to demand at Calcutta conference:

Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of his immortal inheritance of liberty and life? I charge you to restore to your woman their ancient rights, for it is we, not you, who are the real nation builders and without our active cooperation all your congress and conferences are in vain. (quoted in Jha, 2006 : 162).

Thus, woman's pen gets freedom and we get numerous female writers and thinkers in the twentieth century; had Ras Sundari not written *Amar Kotha* women would not dare make their personal experience public. Still, women writers prefer writing autobiographical novels to autobiography in fear of scandal and social criticism. Yet, we have some female writers with their autobiographies for example Taslima Nasrin's memoir *Amar Meyebela* where she has revealed her experience of menstrual period and her autobiography *Ka* where Nasrin has boldly acknowledged her private and even secret life. Nurjahan Bose too opens up her life in her autobiography *Agun-mukhor Meye*.

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