

Quest for Self and Others in Royal Women's Autobiographies: A Study of the Autobiography of Sunity Devee (1864-1932)

TAHITI SARKAR

Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of North Bengal. E-mail: tahiti.sarkar@gmail.com

Abstract: The term 'autobiography' has three constituent parts viz. 'auto', 'bio' and 'graphia' which mean in implication the genre—the description or the art of narration (graphia) of an individual human life (bios) by the individual himself (auto). Autobiography can be a revealing mirror and- a concealing mask. Memory is the main source of truth, memory is a minefield of facts' in an autobiography. Truth in autobiography is 'elusive because of its peculiar narrative tendency. The present study focuses on 'The Autobiography of an Indian Princess' had written by Sunity Devee, the Maharani of the Princely State of Cooch Behar. The author had tried to narrate her life experiences from her early childhood till her present days in a lucid, pictographic form, which is very fascinating as well as very inspiring. Instead of just being a day to day depiction of life, the autobiography has become the saga of the contemporary socio-cultural practices and perfectly balances the concepts of 'selfhood' and 'womanhood' in the contemporary history.

Keywords: Autobiography, narrative, socio-cultural practices, selfhood, womanhood, contemporary history

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Introduction

The word 'Autobiography' means the biography of author himself or herself as a character. The writing of autobiography plays vital role in reconstructions of history during their regimes. It gave us much ideas about their living experiences, lifestyles and forms of socio-cultural system..According to historical perspectives, Autobiography is the narration of himself or herself which describes socio-cultural and historical importance aspects in his writings. There is huge debate and discussion regarding the writing of autobiography of pre-legendaries and autobiography written by royal families. It is very important to write past history with its full evidence and reliable sources. In an autobiography, we can see many defects or absence of sources that it only narrates their life-story and giving much less attentions towards socio-cultural system that was prevalent during their regimes. Some Authors speaks about their living lifestyle but failed to show their social activities. It is very controversial part where researchers need to find many loop holes and fill the gap relating their social-cultural system. Thus, an Autobiography cannot be fully reliable in regarding their past history in details.

Quest for Self and Other in Indian Women's Autobiographies

A student of Autobiographical Studies fronts serious problems relating to this relatively new mode of writing, 'autobiography'. "We commonly do not remember that it is, After all, always the first person speaking", says Thoreau (1986:122-128) and adds in a tone of subtle irony: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I know as well. I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience". In other words, all writing is for Thoreau autobiographical. 'Self-consciousness' and 'absence of frame', these would then be the prominent features of autobiography. In a strictly factual sense autobiographies remain unfinished; not in the sense 'yet to be concluded' that Sucheta Kripalani and Indira Goswami employ it as title for their autobiographies. To consider all writing as autobiographical is to allow the validity of any approach historical, sociological, psychoanalytic, literary critical and even the 'common-sense' reading arbitrarily.

But the academic need is for considering autobiography as a distinct genre. As Linda Anderson (2007:31-32) puts it, On the one hand, autobiography, through its relation to individualism and humanistic values, is seen to be available to nontechnical, common-sense readings. On the other hand, autobiography produces unease that it could spread endlessly and get everywhere, undermining even the objective stance of the critic if it is not held at bay or constrained by classification. Partaking the characteristics of both History and Fiction, autobiography appears to frustrate conventional literary critical approaches to it.

What is the right blend, the right relation between the private self and the public self? Perhaps the right combination is when the personal self-attempts to make society recover from amnesia. That rendering of the public self that cannot become history, is not adequately rendered by the private self. This is why it is inevitable in an autobiography especially a woman's autobiography for the personal self to relate, in definite ways, to the public self. From this angle, even family histories when written especially by a woman, acquires some value.

The relationship of the personal self and the public self perhaps hinges around the crucial role of literary merit. However, attempts in this direction to grant the status of an art work to autobiography would raise serious theoretical questions. New Criticism which is still relevant (especially in India) would inquire into the relation between the text and the author. Eliot's assertion that poetry/art is "not an expression of personality but an escape from personality" brings embarrassment to attempts at seeing an autobiography as a work of art. How to read an autobiographical work as an autonomous world without reference to external circumstances?

Bikhu Parekh's impressive argument is that Gandhi successfully Indianised the autobiographical form. This has important implications in the reading of Indian women autobiographies. From the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who worked against Sati, the Nationalist awakening was concerned with the revision of the image of woman in India. On the one hand, writing autobiography for a woman becomes an act of self-assertion; at the same time gender biases become pale in the Indian colonial context.

Richard Hoggart (1988: 22-24) who in his long essay, "A Question of Tone: Problems in Autobiographical Writing" demands that a serious auto biographer get the "matter of tone straight first". "The most important task of an auto biographer, according to Hoggart (1973:64-88) is to find a "voice" which can "carry a wide range of attitudes and emotions without being socially self-conscious or derivatively literary". Since the "right tone" for any writer "will always be difficult to find", he suggests adopting a "neutral tone." And by "neutral tone", he says he certainly does not mean an

“informed, intelligent, decent voice which is so useful a medium for certain kinds of writing.” Till one locates the right tone of voice, according to him, the best thing to do is “to paddle in the shallows of neutral reporting”. This is all rather vague. A major activity of the present thesis is the identification of the tone of voice in women autobiographies. While ‘tone of voice’ may manifest concretely in a few lines of a poem, the general tone of a whole autobiographical work demands unusual attention and scrutiny. Attention to certain common features of autobiographies may to some extent help in recognizing the tone of voice. These features may not offer a formula to locate the tone-of-voice, but they offer vague hints at least, in understanding the general character of the self-rendered.

It is quite common to find self-narratives opening with as early a childhood as memory permits. Though it may appear as a choice less act, it is not so in the case of sensitive auto biographers. Self-narratives of crude ‘popular’ subjects begin with childhood for convenience, but one who takes to self-narration out of an inner compulsion (for the motives and purposes for writing autobiographies are not always clear) would search for the meaning of his/her existence at the farthest point in the individual past. Childhood is the sourcebook for almost all auto biographers. The tone of voice is rarely false when recollecting childhood. Every autobiography hints at a double conflict: conflict with oneself and a conflict with society. Every autobiography is about growth to a mature position, which is why the dual conflict of self with itself and society often provides maximum scope for depicting growth.

An autobiography wrote James Olney (*1972: 35-39*) in his epoch-making book *Metaphors of Self* "is a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition." Its objective is to build "a metaphoric bridge from subjective self-consciousness to objective-reality." Olney argues that if all selves are unique and if they are constantly evolving and transforming, then it would be difficult to define such a self and even more difficult to give a sense of it to anyone else. The only way to communicate such a self to others is to do so by discovering or creating some similitude for the experience that can reflect or evoke the same experience in others. The psychological basis of the metaphorizing process, according to him, is to grasp the unknown through the known or to "let the known stand for the unknown and thereby fit that into an organized, patterned body of experiential knowledge."

In the same book Olney discusses several male authored self-narratives to illustrate how each one of them invents a unique, exclusive and fresh metaphor to express the self. Up to this point Olney's theorizing is fine; however as he proceeds his theorizing acquires a patriarchal tone. In an imperative tone he prescribes preconditions for the metaphorizing viewpoint and says that such a view point "must be" unitary, specially human and personally unique. This part of his unitary, specially human and personally unique. This part of his theory excludes the minorities from the metaphorizing process.

Like his master Georges Gusdorf (*1980:23*) who advanced the "individualistic paradigm of centrally located isolate autobiographical self"and thus kept out the marginal like blacks and women from the purview of autobiographical writings studies, Olney too overlooks the marginal identity here. He thus confirms his affinity with the school of critical thinking which looked upon minorities either as misfit to be autobiographical subjects because of their lack of isolate individual self or maintained silence over their attempts at autobiography writing and thus shut them out of the canonical discourse.

But these patriarchal theorists, says Susan Stanford Friedman(*1980:33-35*) missed a very important point, namely, "Self-creation and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities and non-Westerners".She further argues that Gusdorf's (1980:33)theory does not take into consideration the importance of the culturally imposed group identity for the minorities, including

women. If "separate selfhood is the very motive of creation (autobiography)" and if autobiography is "a mirror in which the individual reflects his own image" then this mirror does not reflect back a unique image to woman. "It projects an image of Woman, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity" says Benstock. As a result "an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category woman (dictates) the patterns of woman's individual destiny". The post 80's feminist theorists like Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Sheila Rowbowtham, Nancy Chodorow, Susan Friedman, Maison and others expose the inapplicability of Gusdorffian theory to the autobiographies by the minorities and assert the need for a separate poetics for the autobiographies by the minorities which will take into consideration the socio-cultural attributes of their personality. (Ranjana, 2002:54-56)

Thus it can be concluded that, James Olney's theory that every autobiography is a metaphor of self but refute the later part of it which pronounces three pre-conditions for such a self. On the ground of the foregoing argument I assert a space for women and minorities in the theory of metaphorizing and a respectful acknowledgement of such an act by the canon. I reiterate that "instead of dismissing female authored autobiographies on the basis of gender genre (which are both male constructs) incompatibility (again a male view) it is the responsibility of the serious scholars of the genre to explore the specificities of women's self-writing from the geocentric view."

The arguments about the metaphor of self in autobiography in general and Indian women's autobiographies in particular, leads to certain conclusions begin to emerge. Such as-

1. Every autobiography is a metaphor of self.
2. However, it is not necessary for every such metaphor to be original, unique and fresh—women's and those of the marginalized are not so; men's are. I refute Olney's theory in asserting this.
3. On the contrary, the metaphors of self-invented by the marginalised like the Dalit, black and women are rooted in their collective consciousness and shared experience.
4. Their metaphors speak of their aspirations and efforts.
5. Logically women's autobiographies in India create shared, collective metaphors of self namely pen and/or needle broadly signifying the feminine sphere and the masculine sphere under patriarchy in India and also the world.
6. There is not a single autobiography among the ones discussed here adhering to the 'needle-culture' exclusively.
7. However, there are many adhering exclusively to the 'Pen-culture'.
8. A pattern of journey can be traced over the period of five decades of Independence in these autobiographies—a journey from the metaphor of the needle to that of the pen, i.e. from 'feminine' helplessness to 'female' authority.
9. The celebration of 50 years of Independence is also the celebration of the empowerment of Indian 'female' selves as recorded in their autobiographies.

Readings in the Autobiography of Sunity Devee

The book written by Maharani Sunity Devee (1921: 1-2) '*The Autobiography Of An Indian Princess*' narrates her life story starting from her birth till her later years with her grandchildren. She has beautifully wrote autobiography with proper dates and events chronological. Thus, it helps us to

understand the past history of ruling dynasty of Cooch-Bihar, their customs and underlying facts. The author gave a vivid description of her early childhood memories with her family in cooloolola. Sunity Devee was the second of ten children of Keshab Chandra Sen and Jagan Mohinee Devi. Her mother always helped her with preparing subject Bengali and English and taught her morals like- (Devee, 1921: 16) 'Always speak the truth' and 'Respect and obey your parents'. She went to Bethune College. Sunity Devee loved her school very much as she quoted – "Once I had a very high fever and my mother told me not to go to school, but I loved my school, and when my mother had gone to the service I had my bath quietly and dressed, and went off in the school bus". As a children she made a vows – 'I promised to give money to the poor, never to tell a lie, to feed animals and birds, and to give people cool beverages during the hot weather.' (Devee, 1921: 19)

This background is significant for Sunity Devee. She did a pioneering work in the field of autobiographies written by women in India. Sunity Devee's book is the first autobiography by an Indian woman in English and it has a historic importance mainly it being the first modern autobiography by an Indian woman modelled on the western form of the genre of autobiography.

Childhood of Sunity Devi

Sunity Devee was born in a great Sen Family at Calcutta on 1st January 1864. Her father Keshab Chandra Sen was a famous Brahmo leader. Her father wrote about Brahmo movement – "The New Dispensation in India neither shuts out God's light from the vest of the world, nor does it run counter to any of those marvelous dispensations of His mercy which were made manifest in ancient times." (Devee, 1921: 19-22) It simply shows a new interpretation of his eternal goodness, an Indian version and applications of His Universal love. A Brahmo is a person who believes in Brahmo (One God).

Secondly, she mentioned her father Keshab Chandra Sen as a great legend of Brahmo movement. Sunity Devi (1921: 8) praises her father's personality in her statement- "My father had indeed a striking personality: tall and broad-shouldered, he gave one the impression of great strength. I always thought of him as an immortal; his eyes were "homes of silent prayer." Lord Dufferin once remarked to me: "I did not know you were Mr. Sen's daughter."

Looking back on those days of childhood Sunity Devi have vivid memories of their happiness. The great house seemed an enchanted palace. It is difficult to convey to English readers a real idea of the fascination of its cool, silent interior with the six courtyards, and the deep wells which supplied drinking and bathing water. In the zenana part of the establishment where the strict purdah ladies lived, the rooms ran round one of these courtyards, and the ladies were never allowed to walk outside it. When they went into town, the "palkis" came right inside to fetch them.

Victoria College

Curiously enough, some of the men who spoke most strongly against female education were the first to bring their wives out of purdah; indeed, to Sunity Devi's idea, they are now too English. Later on her father established a college in Calcutta named after her late Majesty Queen Victoria. This college will always be associated with the name of Keshab Chandra Sen. He did not believe in the importance of university degrees; he maintained that for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother is far better than to be able to write M.A. or B.A. after her name. Therefore, only things likely to be useful to them were taught to the girls who attended the Victoria College. Zenana ladies also came to the lectures, and the good work flourished. Sunity Devi had always remember the name of Miss Pigot in connection

with the educational movement in India. She was the head of an institution close to where they lived. One of the objects of this institution was to train Christian Indian girls to visit Hindu houses and give lessons to the women who wished to improve their education. Miss Pigot also took charge of Hindu ladies while their husbands were in England.

Maharajah Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur

The fairy prince in her romance was the young Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Maharajah of Cooch Behar, who had been a ward of the Government since his infancy, and carefully educated to be a model ruler. Colonel Haughton wrote: "Ever since I have become Commissioner for Cooch Behar, the honour of the young Maharajah, his future happiness, and the welfare of the State have been my anxious care."

This Indian prince's family records show that he was descended from one of the oldest ruling families in the country. According to popular tradition his race had been founded by the love of a god and a maiden, and through successive ages strife and love have been associated with the dynasty of Cooch Behar, whose chiefs are always great rulers, great lovers, and great fighters.

Colonialism in India did not necessarily mean a sudden breakaway from pre-colonial traditions. The history of colonialism in India shows us that certain pre-colonial traditions were indeed reinforced and reinvigorated through the British Raj, which also evolved around pre-colonial Indian traditions. The pre-colonial Hindu kings of India had been fabricating 'divine kingship' in order to legitimise their ruling authority (Barman, 2014:17-21). The British Indian prince maharaja Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911) of Cooch Behar in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century continued the same pre-colonial notion of kingship based on the divine birth theory despite his ruling authority having already been recognised by the British.

Marriage Controversy

Just as the pioneers of autobiography as form of literature were men from Bengal, similarly Sunity Devee, a Bengali lady wrote the first autobiography ever written by an Indian woman. It is certain that she wrote the book mainly for the western audience especially the "western sisters." For example, she writes, "It is difficult to make my Western sisters understand about caste prejudice in my country." (Devee, 1921:217)

Sunity Devee does not mention in clear words her intention in writing the autobiography. However, R.C.P. Sinha (1986:57) considers that she wrote her autobiography "mainly to clear the cloud that had gathered round her father's fair name on her account") due to his decision of her controversial marriage to Maharaja of Cooch Behar. But this does not appear to be the sound reading of the book convinces us that she might have written it for 'self-revelation'. The narration of the book takes the form of a legendary story.

Sunity Devi clearly describes her father's suffering and struggle during socio-religious movement which we can get many ideas regarding Keshab Chandra Sen's contribution towards social reforms. Sunity Devi's father name was forever associated with the Civil Marriage Act that was entirely Keshab Chandra Sen's efforts that the Government passed the wise measure fixing the marriageable age of men and women at eighteen and fourteen respectively. Sunity Devi describe about how her marriage with Maharajah of Cooch-Bihar happened and the letters passed and repassed between Cooch-Bihar and Calcutta, but nothing was settled until 27th of January, 1878.

The marriage controversy played a vital role especially in her father Keshab Chandra's image where he was criticized by his samaj and followers. Sunity Devi's fairly prince was the young Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Maharaja of Cooch Behar, who had been a ward of the government since his infancy, and carefully educated to be a model ruler Colonel Haughton wrote: "Ever since I have become Commissioner for Cooch Behar, the honour of the young Maharajah, his future happiness, and the welfare of the State have been my anxious care." (Devee, 1921:42) The Government was keenly alive to the fact that marriage might make their experiment and they were determined to do as they could to prevent failure.

The colonial government played Keshab and Debendranath against each other. At the initial stage, they supported Keshab's party. But, when a new committee was appointed to draft a separate marriage bill for the Brahmos along Keshab's line, in an untoward move, on 31 March 1870, the day on which the act was supposed to be passed, a petition carrying the signatures of 2000 Brahmos was sent to Shimla to stall the act. In the face of this dual opposition, the government was forced to drop the original Bill. They enacted a special Civil Marriage Act for Indians to be availed by all people who did not follow any established religion. Though not called the Brahma Marriage Act, this Act III of 1872 was accepted by Keshab's group as their own marriage law.

The Act declared that no marriage should be performed until the bridegroom had completed his 18th year and the bride her 14th year of age. The final rift occurred over a marriage between the 13 years old daughter of Keshab Sen and the minor Maharaja of Cooch-Bihar. Shibnath Shastri and Jadunath Chakraborty wrote that this marriage was to all intents and purpose a "full-blown idolatrous Hindu" marriage. (Das, 1995: 15). Shibanth Shastri's (1878: 54) "Ek ki Brahma Bibaha? (Is this a Brahma Marriage?) debunked the marriage by saying that 'the marriage is like a "particular curry" that is nicely dressed and "tastes very well", but then there is "little more salt and less turmeric, more of pungent material and water than should have been; and spices there were none."

The bride Sunity however denied each of the charges raised against her father relating to her marriage. Her marriage, far from being a private and personal emotion attracted widespread public curiosity. She, on her part, in her memoirs tried to vindicate Keshab's responsibility for this marriage, arguing that her marriage was in fact a romantic union.

When the marriage was first suggested Sunity Devi's father was very surprised. But the Government representatives of the state would not be discouraged. They continued to writing to Sunity Devi's father, interviewing him and sending messages urging that the marriage of the young Prince and Sunity Devi was most desirable. Keshab Chandra repeatedly refused. This unexpected opposition was set back to the plans of the government and they determined it must be overcome at any cost. Sunity Devi's father with trouble mind prayed and prayed until at last he obtained light from above and realised that the marriage would be for the spiritual good of the country.

Early Married Days

After many controversy and debate, finally Keshab Chandra Sen agreed to give her daughter's marriage to Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. But Maharaja had to give a declaration like – The Maharaja wrote to Keshab Chandra Sen as follows:-

"MY DEAR SIR,

"I have been asked to let you know what my honest opinion is on the subject of polygamy." In reply I beg to inform you that it has always been my opinion that no man should take more than one wife,

and I can assure you that I hold that opinion still." I give below a statement of my religious views and opinions. I believe in one true God and I am in heart a Theist.

'Yours truly, "NRIPENDRA NARAYAN BHUP." (Devee,1921:53)

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan had a deep respect and admiration for Keshab Chandra Sen. Even after the marriage of Sunity Devi most of the followers of Keshab Chandra Sen raised objections to Sunity Devi's marriage. Those people continually attacked him and plotted to undermine his authority. The fire of discontent and disloyalty which they kindled blazed fiercely and dazzled the eyes of the unfaithful. Some of them even went so far as to threaten to kill him. All those who had feeble faith left our Church, one after another. Even this did not satisfy the mal contents, and they built a church of their own which is known as Sadharan-Somaj. The Brahmo Act that Sunity's father wished the Government to pass was not agreed to by other Brahmos, such as Maharshi Debendra Nath Tagore, and others. Although the Tagore's called themselves Brahmos, they wanted their marriage ceremony to be known as Hindu marriage (non-idolatrous).

As they opposed it, the Act was not passed, but instead of it Act III. Of 1872, in which one of the many things mentioned was that the bride was not to be under fourteen or the bridegroom under eighteen years of age. According to the marriage Act, bride and groom should be 16 and 18 years to get married but both the bride and the groom was underage, Sunity was only thirteen years old and thus Maharajah had to go Europe UK soon after wedding to complete his studies. Thus, we can visibly see how her father suffered and act on marriage proposal which was finally solved and therefore we can get a great deal of idea regarding socio-cultural and political system of India during mid-nineteenth century.

Marriage Ceremony

When Sunity was sixteen and the Maharajah eighteen it was decided that their "real" marriage should take place in Lily cottage. In quiet ways they had gathered the fragrant flowers of friendship's garden, and there they had seen the roses of love which were blooming for them. Their future lay rich and glowing before them, and their happiness was perfect. They got married in the Church of the New Dispensation.

They started on their new life under the happiest auspices. They left Calcutta by special train in the afternoon for Burdwan, where they were to spend their honeymoon. Sunity was not allowed to meet Indian gentlemen, not even her husband's cousins. The good reason was that there were very few Bengali ladies out of purdah in those days, and her husband strongly objected to her meeting men who did not bring out their own wives. Sunity said- Though he was only two years older than me, he was a very strict husband, and I always respected him as if he had been years older; he was my hero and ideal husband, and whatever he said I thought was right.' (Devee,1921:81)

Life at Cooch Behar

Sunity Devi was greatly delighted when she went to live at Cooch Behar to find there a fine church of the New Dispensation and a girls' school named after her. But there was much room for improvement in the country, although Government had well prepared the way for them. It remained for her husband to be a ruler in the highest sense of the word, and for her to win the hearts of Cooch Behar people as a woman, a wife, and a mother.

From the day of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan accession to the throne, the Maharajah devoted all the earnestness of his nature and his great powers of organisation to plans for the comfort, well-being, and education of his subjects. New roads were made; the systematic development of the resources of the State was undertaken, and hospitals, schools, and public buildings were erected. Some of these are very fine; the Masonic Lodge in Cooch Behar is one of the largest in Bengal. The Maharajah took a keen interest in questions of education and founded a college of which he was very proud.

During that time Hindu princes are allowed to marry as many wives as they wish, but the Maharanis are part of the State, and there is a vast difference between their position and that of the other palace ladies. The ruler's wives are brought to the palace as little girls, there to be married and afterwards educated, solely Sunity Devi obliged to admit that Maharani's must be young girls of good family

She was deeply in love with the nature and environment of Cooch Behar with its abundance of birds and flowers! As she said -"The scenery is glorious, the beautiful lotus covers the rivers, and at some of the old religious festivals the temples are lavishly decorated with the gorgeous pink blossoms. The Cooch Behar climate is splendid; the winters are like those of the South of France, and the spring is heavenly." (Devee, 1921: 98)

Outside she may be considered the Maharani with advanced Western ideas, but in Cooch Behar she was the zenana lady who enters into the lives of the people. Many who at first looked upon Sunity marriage with disfavour took her to their hearts when they found that she was just like all their Maharanis, and that Sunity loved them

First Visit to England

The autobiography is all about herself and tell us about detailed history of long ruling dynasty of Cooch-Behar, their relations with Queen Victoria, Princess's activities in the court of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887. She choose to write her own experience and writes her views of the English society. She travels England often to attend meetings with the Queen and other dignitaries. Queen Victoria was loved by the Indians more than people in England have any idea of, and Maharani Sunity Devi often expressed the belief that our happiness was due to the reign of a Queen. Queen Victoria was known, and will ever be known, as the "Good Queen." (Devee, 1921:169).

The year 1887 was expected to be a memorable one for India, as our late beloved Queen-Empress would celebrate her Jubilee. Sunity Devi said- 'I was greatly honoured when she said she would chaperone me during the Jubilee festivities. I cannot describe my feelings when I found myself in the presence of the Queen. I came away proud and glad, and laughed at myself for my previous terror at being received by one so gracious. The Maharajah was very pleased at our reception, and told me how proud he was of me.' (Devee, 1921:107)

Life at England

Maharaja and Sunity Devi went to Windsor Castle one day to present their gifts to Her Majesty. Maharaja chose a little diamond pendant with an uncut ruby in the middle, and told Sunity to give it to Her Majesty. She said to her husband like this - "I shall be too nervous," but he urged me: " Just a few words, Sunity; it will please Her Majesty." Little did my husband know what those few words cost me." (Devee, 1921:113). Thereafter they went by special train to Windsor, and they arrived at the Castle received by the equerries and high officials. It was the day for Indians to pay their homage to their Empress. Captain Muir was in command of the bodyguard on duty. Maharaja and Sunity entered

the throne room where the Queen was, and she presented their little present with a few words to Her Majesty, who graciously accepted it and thanked her. Sunity felt nervous at the thought of mistakes in her little speech and curtsy, but people who were present in the room said afterwards the Maharani of Cooch Behar's words were clear and her curtsy was most graceful.

One day Sunity was invited to take the children to Windsor Castle. She dressed them in their national costume, which pleased Her Majesty exceedingly. After a few minutes' conversation the Queen said to Sunity: "Do you remember this pendant, Maharani?" Sunity saw that Queen was wearing the jewel which they had the honour of presenting to Her Majesty. Sunity felt very touched at the thought of her wearing their gift, and told Her Majesty so. (Devee, 1921:117)

The kindness shown to Maharani Sunity Devi by Queen Alexandra has never varied since those early days. Both Maharani and Queen have each lost their idolised first-born. They have each lost the best of husbands. They have equally sorrowed. She think that some subtle sympathy draws them together ; each time Sunity have visited her, and she know that the Queen Mother feels as she do, that " There's not a joy the world can give like those it takes away." (Devee, 1921:122-123).

Big Game Hunting

Anglicisation or westernisation proved disastrous to the Narayan family of Cooch Behar as the more the State became Anglicised, the more it lost its influence over the locals. Little wonder that at the end of Nripendra's career, any young British official carried more weight with the people of Cooch Behar than did their own Rajas, or his wife, Sunity Devi. (Menzies, 1918:206). But colonialism also expanded the scope of Nripendra's authority for he was an Indian agent of British imperialism. As it was, the maharaja had to prove his martial credibility to his own subjects as much as to the British and his obsession with militarism went up to a new level. Nripendra, therefore, consciously followed the colonial idea of militarism which was intrinsically linked to hunting in the form of elite 'game' or 'sport.' Hunting occasions were carefully used by Nripendra as a platform to further embolden the Narayan dynasty's claim to restore kshatriyahood.

The hunting memoir, 'Thirty Seven Years of Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar, the Duars and Assam', published in 1908 by Nripendra Narayan Bhup, remains one primary witness to the wildlife slaughter in the name of game that helped him reinvent the pre-colonial kshatriyahood tradition and legitimise his kingship. The memoir of a Cooch Behar maharaja also stood as a euphemism for imperial domination by the Raj. The colonial hunting memoirs were closely aligned with the exploration narrative in terms of the rhetoric of heroism, suffering, harsh landscapes and triumph. (Nayar 2008: p. 136) The typical hunting photographs as visual metaphors display how sportive gesture became an integral part of colonial martial discipline and masculine discourse.

The memoir's publication also appears to have been a significant attempt to project the Cooch Behar maharaja at par with the Marwar Rajputs who were considered 'true sportsmen for their support of and participation in hunting. European hunting skills qualified them to be categorised as the so-called martial. Their shooting parties were the happiest, gayest affairs imaginable. They have to drive miles from the palace right into the jungle to the place where the shooting camp was pitched, usually on the bank of a river, and it used to be quite like a little town under canvas.

The shooting games of Nripendra and his Deputy Commissioners killed a great number of rhinos and tigers. (Chaudhury, 1995: 98) Of all the wild animals (2,075 in total according to his own record) Nripendra shot in the years between 1871 and 1907, mention may be made of a huge number of

wildcats including tigers and leopards (*Panther pardus*) as well as herbivores such as rhinos and buffaloes. All these were essential targets of the royal big game shooting.

Sad Days

Maharani Sunity Devi tells about her widow life which was sad moment in maharani's life but she has tried to conceal her sad life and mentioned positive things of her life. Maharaja was ill and pneumonia set in and was dangerously ill. Maharajah was quite prepared to go, and his world seemed rapidly fading away from him. "Let us be happy together. My journey is almost at an end. Why do you fear death?" (*Devee, 1921:191*) were remarks of Maharaja often made at Bexhill.

Widowhood in India is different from what it was in the west. It is a far harder life and sad for the widow whether she be old or young. If a widow laughs loudly or dresses in a way that could possibly be called gay, cruel remarks are made on all sides, and if a Hindu widow gets at all a bad name she suffers greatly at the hands of both her own people and her late husband's. But in spite of all this her undying love for her dead husband brings her closer to the unknown world every hour and every day; through suffering and darkness she knows she is drawing closer to her beloved.

Another Blow

A few days after her husband had passed away news of Rajey's succession to the Gadi of Cooch Behar arrived from the Government of India. Life went on very much as usual year after year. It was repeated the sad ceremonial of two years ago, when her husband's body was committed to the flames. Only two years and the Ideal Ruler and the Child of Promise, her son Rajey had both vanished from her eyes. Thus, it was a big blow in her life as well as very sad moment in her life as a wife and as a mother. Sunity (1921:212) state that- 'But what remained for me? I had to suffer the long days and the misery of the hours when sleep forsook me and grief kept a watch by my pillow.'

It was Maharani Sunity Devi's happiness to know that Jit and Victor worked hand in hand for the welfare of Cooch Behar. Jit's great ambition was to make his State a model one, and he was always eager to help forward its progress. Thus, we see at last, Sunity Devi had to face losses, grievances and had very tough time but still she handled a situation very calmly. Although, she was a very strong women as she has tried to conceal her sad life and mentioned positive things of her life despite her widow life which was sad moment in maharani's life which reflects her personality that she was a courageous, powerful and determined women.

Sunity Devee's experience in England also exposes to the socio-cultural similarities and dissimilarities of the land of the colonized and colonizer in an Imperial context. It seems that Maharani Sunity Devi was seen as the colonized women who tries to fit herself in the land of colonizers with an active spirit and enthusiasm. Her descriptive accounts of her everyday life in England and the royals was written for western audience especially the 'western sisters' to understand about caste prejudice of country.

Poem Written by Sunity Devi

Maharani Sunity Devi wrote after she lost her son and husband in her statement – "I had to live and think that to live is sometimes the worst torture that can be inflicted on mankind. How often have I proved to myself the truth of those lines:

It's hard to smile when one would weep, to speak when one would silent be: To wake when one would wish to sleep, And wake in agony." (*Devee,1921:212*).

Another line she wrote:

“Take them, O Grave! And let them be Folded upon thy narrow shelves, as garments of the soul laid by, And precious only to ourselves. “Take them, O great Eternity! Our little life is but a gust that bends the branches of thy tree And trails its blossoms in the dust.” (Devee,1921: 214)

Later Days of Sunity Devi’s Life

Maharani Sunity Devi’s later year talks about her son Jit and Victor and their children’s. She feels very proud with her both son and describe Jit’s love for his people was deep and he takes great interest in administration. During the last few years Maharani have travelled and would like to tell us something about her country. She went on a Hindu pilgrimage to a place called Haridwar. In her book “Nine Ideal Indian Women,” there is a story about Sati, near Haridwar was Sati’s birthplace, an old palace which was ruined, where Maharani and her third sister went to see.

The sad life of Maharani Sunity Devi has brought a great change into her life. She felt the unknown world was near to her. She believes that God gifted her with everything that was precious, and one thing she wishes to leave behind her and that was Love. She felt her strength has gone and often wonder why she was left. She states like this –“I had a house with four walls like rock and a strong roof that sheltered me, and now the roof is gone and two of the walls are down.” (Devee ,1921:240)

She was a strong women with so much sorrow and grief but still walked on the edge of those life. Sunity Devi’s only wish was to serve her family and her people and Church, the Church of the New Dispensation.

Women’s Education

Sunity Devi’s father Keshab Chandra Sen formed a Normal School for girls, called the Native Ladies' Normal School. Her father fought for female education and later on her father established a college in Calcutta named after her late Majesty Queen Victoria. This college are always be associated with the name of Keshab Chandra Sen. He did not believe in the importance of university degrees but instead he believed that for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother is far better. Therefore, only things likely to be useful to them were taught to the girls who attended the Victoria College. Zenana ladies also came to the lectures, and the good work flourished. Sunity remembered the name of Miss Pigot in connection with the educational movement in India. She was the head of an institution close to where we lived. One of the objects of this institution was to- train Christian Indian girls to visit Hindu houses and give lessons to the women who wished to improve their education.

Keshab Chandra Sen founded other institutions, but they do not all existed because of lack of finances. In the zenanas one can find fine characters, educated up-to-date women, good nurses, clever accountants, sweet singers, most loving mothers, and devoted wives, and as far as looks go, it is hard to beat a real Indian beauty. Sunity Devi’s wishes in her autobiography was if she lives, to have an Ashram for gentlefolk where they can live in peace and receive instruction, and it was her great hope that – before many years have passed Indian women will stand in their right place and once again India will cry aloud- " I am proud of my daughters". (Devee,1921:242.)

Sunity Devee’s involvement in women’s education played a significant role in imparting education to girls and the progress was immense and grows rapidly during the second half of nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, educations was not preferred in Cooch Behar State. It was introduced only after the British rule in a state of Cooch Behar. The importance of education specially for women

was started only after the rule of British. Women's were largely neglected specially in the field of education. Women's were not allowed to go outside, they were to stay in their own house and most importantly, the system of purdah was largely practised resulting no any sort of freedom was given to women under these patriarchal society. Thus, Maharani Sunity Devee along with her husband Maharajah Nripendra Narayan initiatives of women's education was started in 1881 and which was named as Sunity College. Therefore, with the introduction of education in Cooch Behar it was spread rapidly and most of the low classes women's were educated and later fought for her rights in the form of journal, newspapers, poems and in the form of autobiography. Later on, after 1940's many women had also participated in politics as well.

Understanding the Notion of Customary and Contemporary Contrast in Sunity Devee's Autobiography

The Indian princes provided "despotic, patriarchal but essentially benevolent authority" (Allen and Dwivedi 1984:11) which allowed many arts and excellences to flourish. They were the protectors of the Indian culture. The princely states survived in India in the face of foreign invasions from the eighth-century onwards and in the eighteenth century, with the weakening of the Central Mughal power, the Maratha generals, Muslim nawabs and Sikh sardars declared them as independent rulers of the newly founded kingdoms by themselves. The British imperial rule in India started in 1858 under the British Crown was a serious blow to the position of the Indian princely states. In return of the recognition of the British paramount power, the 'Indian Kingship' got the security of the titles and borders of their States. Hereafter the Indian princely rulers were answerable to the British Crown and not to the praja or the subjects. Charles Allen states "This 'Indian India' was made up of 565 Indian States enjoying direct political relations with the Government of India... Each had its own ruler who governed his subjects very much as he (or very rarely, she) wished but owed ultimate allegiance to the Queen-or-King-Emperor through the person of the Viceroy." (Allen and Dwivedi, 1984:12) With the exception of a few, the Indian princes looked after the welfare of their subjects and their well-being with paternal feelings. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda and Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur were known for their love and efforts for the public welfare. However, a few rulers led a life of luxury neglecting their duties towards the public.

Sunity Devee, Maharani of Cooch Behar State wrote 'The Autobiography of an Indian Princess' in 1921. Sunity Devee's book deals with tradition as well as modernity because she lived in traditional cultures which reflects on her autobiography where she talks about purdah system, polygamy and child marriages. She gave details views of Indian princess life and their living styles and luxuries as well. The first till third chapters tells about her early childhood memories and about her father Keshab Chandra Sen, which gave us idea about social reforms like child marriages, widow remarriages and Government Consent bill Act and certain social restrictions. Her traditional view is basically on Hindu marriages and system of purdah and polygamy which was prevalent at her times.

The main narration is occasionally scattered with long essay-like chapters e.g. Ch.-IX-English Society, Ch.-VII-My First Visit to England and Ch.-XIV-Viceroy I Have Known, but they are not apart but are attached with the main story. On the surface, the form of the book is like 'a reminiscence' and in certain chapters describing her excursions it is like a travelogue but basically it is 'an autobiography proper' or 'formal autobiography' or 'pure autobiography' because she sticks to the underlying principle of 'growth of her personality and character' and reveals the protagonist in her roles as a child, beloved,

wife, mother and Maharani. The contemporary milieu in this autobiography is worth noting for it gives us the proper picture of the royalty of the time. Many social customs and conventions are given.

Being western educated Sunity Devee's 'Indian Princess..' is the first autobiography by an Indian woman in English and it has a historic importance mainly it being the first modern autobiography by an Indian woman modelled on the western form of the genre of autobiography. Just as the pioneers of autobiography as form of literature were men from Bengal, similarly Sunity Devee, a Bengali lady wrote the first autobiography ever written by an Indian woman. It is certain- that she wrote the book mainly for the western audience especially the "western sisters." For example, she writes, "It is difficult to make my Western sisters understand about caste prejudice in my country." (Devee, 1921:217)

Sunity's writing is an interesting chemistry of simple Indian girlish ideals and cultured, well produced and refined traditions. Though it borders a little on the pro-Imperial side, nevertheless the accounts of her visit to England are objective and matter of fact. Sunity Devee's experience in England also exposes the reader to the socio-cultural similarities and dissimilarities of the land of the colonized and colonizer in an Imperial context. Her narrative focuses on the displays that put the English at the centre of the spectacle and portray (perhaps more subtly) how the English are viewed by the traveller from the east.

Women travellers, like Maharani Sunity Devee had then to write about their experiences from within a tradition that denied them a role. Yet she like all other women travels in all kinds of roles- as a wife of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, sister, daughter of visionary and reformer Keshub Chandra Sen, as a Maharani, and as an explorer who seeks to prove something to her. She becomes the individual in search of the unexpected or of leisure or instruction, alone or accompanied, for personal or professional reasons. Women like her can never be silenced, because they choose to write about their experiences in full knowledge of the absence of a tradition into which they could insert themselves with any degree of comfort or familiarity. As she herself says, "On this homeward voyage, I could not help feeling that I was very different from the rather timid little person who had set out on the Great Adventure..." (Devee, 1921:135-36).

Sunity Devee's autobiography shows that it is actually the colonizer's gaze and interpretation of cultures that is not only monolithic but also inchoate. The Maharani's experiences in England and her views of the English society reflect a perfect example of Indo-British cultural encounter and an alternative mapping that traces the most trivial and banal patterns of everyday life that cannot but help one to think and speculate that her autobiography has the power of making her western audience realize that someone has rendered them recognizable and transparent. It may be possible that many readers must have recognized themselves as characters of the book put on display while they were busy displaying themselves in their entire refinery, bejewelled and bedecked and all this time a member of the royal entourage from the east was not only peering at them but also writing back at them. The Autobiography of an Indian Princess not only becomes a site for the "collision and contestation" of cultures, it also becomes a *via media* for the writer to internalize her status as a colonized being. Through her negotiations with the colonizers, Sunity Devee is able to create a completely different set of structures that are not only identifiable but also outside patriarchal/masculine control.

Sunity Devee does not mention in clear words her intention in writing the autobiography. However, R.C.P. Sinha considers that she wrote her autobiography "mainly to clear the cloud that had gathered round her father's fair name on her account" (Sinha,1984: 57) due to his decision of her controversial

marriage to Maharaja of Cooch Behar. But this does not appear to be the sound reading of the book convinces us that she might have written it for 'self-revelation'.

Her autobiography is a truthful account of her growth as a woman, family life, the contemporary social and religious conditions and relations of the Princely States with the British Crown. It is a modest, honest and sincere narration. Subjectivity abounds in the book in narration of her private aristocratic life but absence of sham and pomp of aristocracy in narration brings in objectivity. She scrutinises her 'self' with objectivity. She gives priority to her self-portrayal though she draws more characters like Keshav Chandra Sen, her father, Rajey, her eldest son, other sons and daughters and several Viceroys in India. In addition, she records the contemporary milieu. But all the other characters and milieu contribute to the growth of her personality.

Conclusion

So far in the above pages I have analysed the concept of 'self' and 'other' with special reference to the autobiography by Maharani Sunity Devee on the norms of form and function of autobiography. It does not deviate very much from the accepted parameters of the form. The author reveals her 'self' to a large extent. They reflect the contemporary ethos and give enough knowledge of the life of royalty in India before and after Independence. As a study of modern-day fictional voices, the autobiographies by women are momentous for the assertion of female mind, of the feminine individuality and its meticulous way of reaction and thoughts. Autobiography as a genre becomes an apparatus for these writers, as they have taken the initiative of autobiography writing to make a distinction of the 'self' in competition and the strength of mind to grasp on their motivating convictions and morality as they were in search of peace, solitude and tranquillity. They had the dignity, the grace, the refinement and poise in their writing.

Narrated in the first person, the autobiography of Sunity Devee deal mainly focusing primarily on the self-versus family, society and politics, the subordinated, dilemma of being woman, domination, restraint and great effort for liberation. Generally, based on memory and experience, she has tried to reproduce the cultural modes of self-narration and simultaneously countering their devalued position in the patriarchal Indian set up. Scripts can be considered as an instrument to bond the space or rupture the stillness contributing to creation of the female right to be heard and the thought of writing is a way of retrieval is in charge of one's life. It can be considered as a means to break out from the overshadowing approach of the humankind conquered as well as unwavering by laws made by men, existential uncertainties, is also more than revolutionary and most importantly, a woman's endeavour to liberate her forces from beginning to end the progression of narrative pattern.

Thus the author has explored her feminist life and defined her selfhood and identity as a woman. It has changed the stereotype image of women and mutineer alongside the dictates of their household duties and community consent; confront male orthodoxies about women's character, capacities and responsibility.

The interior push for independence, lack of restrictions, self-assertion, autonomy and independence, loss, rummage around for personality, nostalgia, manifestation, methodical mental picture of understanding, thought process of the world are typically romantic description are refined by these women in their autobiographical writings. It has gone through the process of self-introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. The work has re-established the space and re-root itself as it tries to gratify the urge for self-distinctiveness by writing story of the life of the Maharani.

Emancipated and self-assertive, the autobiography of Sunity Devvee has articulated its excruciating opinion of isolations in her writings. The pressure of socio-cultural ethos around a creative woman tends to smother her freedom of expression. In its primary form, autobiography avails an opportunity for women to satisfy their urge for self-expression, self-love and also, expression of love life they lived. Such an attempt sounds a strong gesture of protest to modern critics. In patriarchal set-up, women writers have often been forced to follow the standards of men imposed on them.

This article puts down foundation for an alternative cultural history as the women writers show not only their literary achievements and cultural periods of their time but also reveals simultaneously the social, economic and gender problems. The research portrays women's positive participation in family and public life and the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming how one's rights can be maximised.

Helps in conquering personal qualms and consciousness of self-merit in addition to the research focus on the feminine psyche which advance a rework from tradition to modernity. Urging the readers and other socio-culturally repressed women to rediscover their marginal selves and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment.

Women writers have been seeking their own space, metaphorical rooms of their own, for centuries. Women's spaces are largely unspoken, unwritten, unrepresented ones that have not yet been fully articulated or explained. It is in these spaces between the cultural constructions of the female and the articulation of the individual selves and their lived experiences, between cultural assignments of gender and the individual's translations of them into text that a discussion of women's autobiographical writing can be effective.

It is true that a stable autobiographical form against which women have written about their lives does not exist, and an evolving notion of what autobiography is has not been deduced from the texts women did write, or from texts that problematize autobiography or challenge the genre's formation, limits and illusion of reality. Women's self-representational writing, bracketed from the defining discussions of the genre, has both escaped and has never been offered the chance of being defined as a genre of its own.

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