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Inscribing the Self by the Cultural Others: Kailashbashi Debi and Saradasundari Debi

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Abstract: *Western literary autobiography is conventionally conceived of as a unique form of self-presentation by a 'singular entity' proclaiming his superiority over and distinction from a myriad of relative nonentities. This paper shall try to socially locate the autobiographical endeavour and the essence of the lives of two Hindu bhadramahilas through their diary and autobiography. An attempt would be made to find out the significance of the distinguished 'I' when a woman constructs her autonomous entity and the agency of othersaround her. It will be explored whether self-construction of women whose families were active in the socio-political transition in nineteenth-century Bengal bore marks of an 'idiosyncratic,' 'individuated,' 'inviolable,' 'singular' self-considered essential for life-writing.*

Keywords*:* Personal Narratives, Agential Voices, Female Experiences, Emotions, Fragmented Subjectivities, Dismembered Recollections.

Introduction

Literary autobiography being predominantly a male legacy from the West, it was conceived to be a unique form of self-presentation by a 'singular entity' with a coherent worldview proclaiming *his* superiority over, and distinction from a myriad of relative non-entities (Weintraub 1978; Ellis 2000). Unlike in the West, the first biography written in Bengali happens to be *Naricharit* (Lives of Women) by a Christian woman Saudamini Martha Sinha (1865), a high caste Hindu housewife from a conservative rural household. Similarly, Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* (My Life) (1868) holds the distinction of being the first autobiography written in Bengali. These were penned about three decades before 'renaissance men' from Bengal started writing about their lives, the first being Debendranath Tagore's *Swarachita Jiban-Charit* (A Self-Written Account of Life) (1898).

This paper attempts to socially locate the autobiographical endeavour and the essence of the lives of two Hindu *bhadramahilas* - Kailashbashini Debi and Saradasundari Debi - through their diary and autobiography. The diary explored here is that of Kailashbashini Debi (Kailashbashini Debi 1982) dealing with the period 1846–73. This, arguably, is the only one maintained by a woman of nineteenth-century Bengal. It was first serialised in the Bengali monthly, *Basumati* in 1953, with the title 'Janaika Grihabodhur Diary'(Diary of a Certain Housewife). The autobiography titled *Keshabjanani Debi Saradasundarir Atmakatha* (Life-Story of Saradasundari: The Mother of Keshab) was dictated by Saradasundari Debito her grandson-in-law Jogendralal Khastagir in 1892 when she claims she was 73 years old and completes it in 1900. It was later republished as 'Atmakatha' (Saradasundari Debi 1982). I have looked into the reprinted versions of the texts in the second volume of *Atmakatha* (Jana et al. 1982).

Kailasbashini Debi was married to Kishorichand Mitra (1822–73) who was an enlightened social reformer associated with the British India Association, and the iconoclastic Young Bengal group. Back in 1843, Kishorichand established the Hindu Theo-philanthropic Society in Calcutta. A litterateur, while he contributed in the daily newspaper, *Bengal Hurkaru,* and the journal, *Bengal Spectator*, Kishorichand was also the editor of *The Indian Field*. He was with the judicial service, too, rising to the rank of Junior Magistrate of Calcutta. Kishorichand's brother, Pearychand Mitra, had joined the 'Public Library' as deputy librarian in 1835 and retired as the curator. In 1854, he and Radhanath Sikdar started a monthly magazine, *Masik Patrika*, written in simple spoken Bengali prose published 'especially for women'. Pearychand's *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (*The Spoilt Child of Worthless Parents* 1858) which holds the contested claim of being the first Bengali novel was serialized in *Masik Patrika*. He wrote a number of books on the condition of women, the rigidities of caste system and intemperance. Pearychand writes in the introduction to his book *Adhyatmika* (1879) that his grandmother, mother and aunts read Bengali books. They were capable of writing in Bengali and keeping accounts. Thus, Kailashbashini hails from a progressive family in nineteenth-century Bengal which promoted women's education.

Jogendralal Khastagir perceives the life-story of Saradasundari as that of an *Acharya-Mata* (Mother of a Brahmo Minister) depriving her of autonomous agential role. His interpretation is in keeping with the expectation of the nationalists who eulogised the pedagogical role of the enlightened mother. As the name of the book suggests, he aims to present a public

image of the Brahmo social-religious reformer Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) through the private words of his mother. Jogendralal, in the long preface called 'Nibedan' to the book published from Dacca on 31 December, 1913, informs us that Girish Chandra Sen (1835-1910), the editor of *Mahila*, urged him and his wife Sarala Debi to write a book about the penury, religiosity and benevolence and the dexterous household management of Saradasundari Debi for the 'wellbeing of the Bengali women' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 4). Hence, they got the dictated autobiography published in the Bengali journal *Mahila*. To Jogendralal, this book was 'as sacred as a religious text' written 'for the future followers of *Naba Bidhan* (New Dispensation) thousand years hence.' Jogendralal feels: 'If Saradasundari as the mother of Keshab Chandra had not guided her son's religion in the fully nationalist sense, this eternally new religion would have been presented in a westernised garb' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 4). Interestingly, being the mother of Keshab or influencing his public life is not the narrative purpose of Saradasundari herself, nor is he the pivot of her narrative.

In my endeavour to distinguish male-authored personal narratives from those penned by female authors, I would attempt to find out the significance of the distinguished 'I' when a woman constructs her entity and delineates the agency of othersaround her through personal narratives. Is she guided by egotism — entailing simultaneous flaunting and normalization of one's idiosyncratic singularisation — which is essential in the autobiographical act? Does her portrayal of life bear mark of an 'individuated', 'singular' self with unique personality traits, values, attitudes that are considered to be markers of self-construction? Does she possess a sense of inviolable, coherent 'I' that impels her to consciously write about her life? Is it that the self gets effaced within the histories she observes and records?

The diary and the autobiography chosen here betray selective re-presentation of life with an authorial bias. Rather than being a developmental narrative with a purpose and goal, the anecdotal depiction of people, events and activities here lead to lack of self-analytic evocation of life as a totality. The texts unfold identities with characteristic fissures, incompleteness and diffidence that challenge the consistency of the narrative. However, the patterning and imagining of a fragmented identity is mediated by contemporary cultural configurations that determine what and in which manner the 'cultural others' can recreate their selves. The female narrators might have deliberately destabilised the unity of the universal 'I' and the authoritativeness of the rigidly controlled, self-aware subjectivity claimed

by the male authors. Literary theorists (e.g., Jelinek1986: 41-53; Benstock 1988; Leigh Gilmore 1994) speak about politics of identity and agency where the female self chooses to have a less autonomous personhood, without a distinctive subjectivity. In fact, this decentred and relational identity lends idiosyncratic vitality to authorial and autobiographical space.

The narratives relate the mechanics by which nineteenth-century society was changing, and its effect on the age, as well as on individuals who fill the pages of these female tales.Both the texts explicate the instrumentality of historical circumstances, social institutions, material forces, cultural discourses and ideological practices in life-writing. These informed minds betray remarkable awareness of the uncertainties and constraints of their times. Both the narrators connect their individual life experiences with socio-historical institutions and portray a linkage between their lives and workings of society. Paradoxes, arising out of relationship to their family members, conflicts on varied issues of nineteenth-century social reform movement and dilemmas arising out of them, reflect in microcosm the social drama which was being enacted in the larger cultural macrocosm. This interaction between personal dilemmas and broader public issues endow unique personalities to the authors which perhaps impelled them to inscribe non-conformist subjectivity.

The patterns of remembrance produce dismembered texts and give rise to complex temporality. Kailashbashini mostly measures her time in terms of days, months, years according to the Bengali lunar calendar. Saradasundari, on the other hand, bears distinct spatial and temporal consciousness. She measures time in terms of broad landmarks in life such as births, marriages and deaths. Saradasundari's recollection of such events is interspersed with conflicting dates. She also admits that she has cannot remember the sequence of her pilgrimages spread over forty-five years due to her old age. The narrative turns out to be a subversive space where the chronological, progressive, sequential patterning of narrative rationality is defied. This disruption of linearity is in keeping with the fragmented and interrupted life that women are forced to live. In reality, contemporaneous socio-cultural codes legitimise and naturalise shifting, contradictory, fractured and co-existing identities and subjectivities for a domestic woman.

Janaika Grihabodhur Diary (The Diary of a Certain Housewife)

The unpolished prose and the colloquialism of the dialect in Kalishbashini's diary hardly manifest her intellect. This artless prose-writing gives the feel

of an authentic literary self and inconsistent feminine subjectivity. Thenumerous erratic spellings, naiveté of language and grammatical mistakes are compensated by richness of her thought. Lacking arrangement, structure, plan and theme, with profusion of random notes on details of daily life, this text provides an opportunity for a departure from a coherent recreation of life. Carrying instantaneous impression of Kailashbashini's moods, dilemmas, reactions, attitudes, intimate thoughts, tastes, aptitudes and sensitivity, the diary displays spontaneous urge for self-expression. Moving through a series of moments in time, while the diary helps gauging fluctuations, aberrations and imperfections in Kailashbashini, it is counterpoised by gaps, silences and absences.

Generally, the circularity of time in women's life, with continually repetitive diurnal activities, does not leave much space for variation. Since her husband, Kishorichand Mitra, took her along with him to the places where he was posted, Kailashbashini's life was blessed with novel experiences. His desire to share his public life with his wife endowed her with a somewhat independent personality. This perhaps propelled her to recreate her own life on the pages of the diary. Kailashbashini's chosen scheme of self-projection is much like a travelogue, scripting her own journey of self-discovery through places she had visited after the death of her son in 1846. She provides precise description of the sub-division and the district of Bengal that she travelled through and resided in. Interestingly, she refers to places in names that were used by the local populace, disregarding the names used by the British for their new administrative divisions. She refers to Rajshahi as Rampur and Barrackpore as Chanok. The narrative bears out her sense of history as she refers to Natore as the capital of the illustrious Rani Bhabani which, in Kailashbashini's time, was under her successors. Mentioning the battlefield of Plassey, where 'the British and the Nawab fought for the first time', she writes about the 'inexplicable feeling of joy and numerous other emotions that were evoked (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 3). Speaking about Jahanabad in Midnapur, she mentions that during the Sepoy Mutiny, the soldiers of the Badshah of Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar-II, stayed there. She adds that prior to this, even the Mughals and the Pathans fought at this place (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 16).One finds reference to people of historical importance made rather unceremoniously. Describing her stay in Rajshahi she writes: 'Nothing worthwhile happened there. Only Dwarkanath Tagore passed away in England (1846)'(Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 4).While commenting on her visit to Kashiand Prayag on the auspicious occasion of Kumbh Mela, she mentions the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh to these places accompanied by various

Rajas (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 33).At the same time, when detailed description of each incident is accompanied by the names of the persons involved, she curiously leaves unmentioned the works that find pride of place in the social history of nineteenth-century Bengal. There is silence on public works Kishorichand had undertaken in Natore - building of schools for boys and girls, making of a hospital, digging of ponds, construction of road between Rampur and Dighapotia via Natore (Ghosh 1926: 77–85).

The traditional Brahmanical construct directed that a woman who received education was inevitably widowed. To subvert social strictures and repel her chances of being widowed, she procured knowledge in English from her husband at night.While education under her husband's supervision helped creating a bond between them, it bestowed power and authority to him (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 20). A European lady teacher, Miss Tugod, too, was hired on a monthly salary of [1] 25. Kailashbashini's extensive reading is reflected in her literary references. In nineteenth-century public debates, there was much anxiety over women reading 'trashy, romantic novels'. Female readers were repeatedly cautioned against romantic love and illicit passion represented in translated versions of English novels (Walsh 2004; Ghosh 2006). Kailashbashini, however, was acquainted with both English and Bengali novels. She unhesitatingly mentions that when Kishorichand went for his official visits, she 'lived like Robinson Crusoe' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 15). When she went to Kashi with her sister, she found a friend in Lakshmimoni, with whom she discussed Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Mrinalini* (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 34).On another occasion, she writes about the bounty of crops and indigo production she had read about in the daily, *Sambad Prabhakar* (Kailashbashini Debi 1982:19-20).

The form of a diary being private and personal, one finds candid expressions of mutual compassion and evolving friendship between the couple, evoking the Western ideal of a companionate marriage. The effortless companionship was consolidated by Kishorichand's decision to take her along. Without interference from the larger family, the pleasure of uninterrupted closeness and shared experiences permitted overt displays of affection and openness in communication, highly unusual in nineteenth-century Bengal. When she expresses her inability to write after childbirth, Kishorichand wrote back saying that she was 'cruel' and 'heartless' not to 'write just one line upon repeated entreating (Kailashbashini Debi 1982:4-5).Once when she was critically ill, Kishorichand took great care of her, which gave her 'pleasure even in illness'. Readings of normative literature showthat in those times, such consideration for the health of the wife was uncommon. To elucidate

how indispensable, she was to Kishorichand, she relates another occasion when he allowed her to attend his niece's wedding with much reluctance. Right after the ceremony, he expressed his 'pain' grown out of forced separation. Not only did he defy injunctions on male propriety that dictated that the husband was not to express emotional longing for the wife, Kishorichand even personally provided her food, water, and clothes to wear as maidservants were yet to arrive (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 20-2).

The rhetoric of wifeliness came with a justification of wifely restrictions even with friends. She states that in Rampur Boalia she was happy being surrounded by female company. Apart from socialising during the festivities, they used to sail together and play cards (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 11). In Natore, she was allowed to interact with a few families, even with Muslims. However, this was confined to taking bath in the river with friends at dawn; occasional visits to each other's place during daytime on palanquin and; walks to houses adjacent to each other at night. When she visited Kashi with her mother-in-law and few other women, she was excited about the freedom of interaction, not only with unacquainted women, but also with her mother-in-law, whom she came to know from close quarters for the first time. On another occasion, she mentions how glad she was to befriend the vivacious wife of the Deputy Magistrate at Garbeta, Mr. Jogeshchandra Ghosh. During Kishorichand's posting at Jahanabad (Midnapore) in 1852, Kailasbashini complains of her loneliness: 'In Jahanabad I saw no other face. That was a painful experience… I would teach my daughter and write this diary'(Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 15).One finds evasive acknowledgement of the limitedness of female solidarity and sisterhood and vocal commitment to happiness despite lonesomeness:

> Men had a larger socialising group than we had. Nevertheless, we were happy…as women our demands are few, our minds slight, hence we were satisfied with little. That independence was enough for us...When Babu went out for his rounds or to the district areas, then all of us used to wander in the garden…They did not come before my husband nor did I appear before theirs (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 11-2).

Her attitude towards Kishorichand was more of admiration for a loving husband than that of obedience to patriarchal authority. She was aware that her life had an independent quest. Once, Kailashbashini and her daughter were caught in a storm on Padma. She was exuberant receiving a note written by a panic-stricken Kishorichand expressing his relief on their return. He states that, had anything happened to them, he would have jumped

down from the boat of the *sahib* into the Padma. Her forthright comment suggests that she did not submerge her ego as the subordinate partner: 'That does not surprise me. On the contrary, had he not done so, I would have been surprised. Not all the prayers in the world can give anyone a wife like me' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982:7-8). Kishorichand had to postpone Kumudini's marriage, as Kailashbashini was fatally ill. If the delay became an impediment in finding a suitable groom, he decided to take Kumudini to Britain and get her married at a mature age. Kailashbashini snaps back saying that it would be fine if he married Kumudini to a *sahib* and he himself married a *memsahib*. In a dramatic passage, Kishorichand declares his love for her and asks her to acknowledge that he never neglected her. Kailashbashini responds to this with sharp wit saying that it has been so because she has never done anything to deserve chastisement. From her childhood she followed his instructions (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 29).

Bearing the hallmark of a developed self, she was conscious about her own worth. However, the confidence she exuded was a derivative one, for it rose from the fact that she was in many ways Kishorichand's creation. Having admitted that women are cast according to the persona of their husband, she opines that her superstitious friend, Lakshmimoni, would have been a remarkable person, had she been married to an honest, educated man. She likens a woman to a 'seed' that accidentally falls on the ground and grows 'into a tree' to bear 'fruits'. Attributing her sagacity to her association with her enlightened husband, she compares herself to a well-nurtured tree: 'Whatever I am today is due to the fact that the ground has been cultivated and watered very carefully… My mind might have been fertile, but even the most ignorant person would have become enlightened if so much care was taken of' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 35).

While she was not an unthinking and docile individual, her effort to uphold the ideal of a *sugrihini* (good wife) made her negotiate between acquiescence and defiance. On one occasion, Kailashbashini managed to cajole her mother-in-law to take her along to the temple of the king of Chandrakona (Midnapur) in the palanquin meant for the attendants. This being in defiance of Kishorichand's order, she writes in great detail of the fear that gripped her (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 17).She was aware that the idiom of wifely devotion gave her certain license to transgress wifely conformism, but her liberties were not boundless. This illustrates that even companionate marriages were not entirely egalitarian and husbands exercised disciplinary power. She, in fact, was elated to be the wife of a 'rich and powerful' man (Kailashbashini Debi,1982: 11). The euphoria of a

blissful marriage emanated partly from pride in the social position that her husband's authority bestowed upon her. Talking about herself and her women companions, she observed:

> The world looked up to them with honour but our husbands would live and die atour directive. What can ail women who have such husbands at their feet?Moreover, we stay with our husbands at their place of work (Kailashbashini Debi1982: 16).

Interestingly, the empathetic conjugal bond and emotional closeness faced adversity in the new familial set-up in Kolkata. Kishorichand was promoted in June 1854 as the 'first Bengali Junior Magistrate of Calcutta', 'drawing a salary of ¹ 800' (Kailashbashini Debi1982: 22-3). He founded the Samajonnati Vidhayini Suhrid Samiti (The Society of Friends for the Promotion of Social Improvement) at Kashipur on December 1854. The social reform movement made Kishorichand adopt a way of life that ultimately brought about an estrangement in the mental worlds of the couple. Kailashbashini was placed in complex and contradictory situations. While Kishorichand adopted ways of his more radical peers of the Young Bengal, Kailashbashini bore disgust for it: 'I would not name them—these uncivilised 'gentlemen'—members of the British India Association who instigate him to drink' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 24). One notices how deeply agonised she was by the disrespect shown towards her feelings and slighting of her concern by the newly Westernized Kishorichand.

Kailashbashini confesses that she follows Hindu rituals without being 'convinced of its basic validity'. She writes: 'I do not believe in Hindu rituals, but I have all through observed them... I fear being excommunicated... Death is preferable to that' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 24-5). Living in a social world that defined the woman's identity in relational terms with family, clan, caste, and community; excommunication would have destabilized her very being. When asked by Kishorichand, she adds that she does not have faith in Kishorichand's lifestyle, either (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 24-5). While he could risk alienating the more orthodox relatives by pursuing liberal beliefs and flouting conservative norms, the culturally defined notion of woman as the custodian of culture and familial bonds saw Kailashbashini caught between the abiding forces of 'tradition' and inescapable forces of 'modernity'.

The education that she received from her husband had imposed on her a critical rationality, but her socialization taught her to be conventional. The

contradiction within Kailashbashini is laid bare on more instances than one. Quite contrary to the reformist sympathy for the plight of the Hindu widow, Kailashbashini applies her enlightened powers of logic to rationalise the rigid Brahmanical ascetic injunctions about widowhood, which were disciplinary, punitive, and depriving. In a lengthy disquisition, she even defends idol worship, but finally insists that ethical action is more important than the worship of god. She reproaches the duplicity of professed believers who lived a morally depraved life and instigated many to abandon Hinduism. To her, religion was a matter of personal belief and not an affair of public display.

Kailashbashini exposes the hypocrisy of the practitioners of religion who made atypical exceptions for people in power. On February 1857, Kishorichand married-off 11-year-old Kumudini to an educated, lower caste Mullick boy, unafraid that this act would ruin the ancestral line (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 28). During the festivities that followed the British and the Indians dined together, breaking rigid commensality practices. Ramgopal Ghosh commended Kishorichand's fortitude. Since all those who had gone to Ghosh's daughter's wedding were later excommunicated, Kailashbashini observes that it was Kishorichand's influential position that refrained people from creating a furore on the issue (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 30).We do not find Kailashbashini's reaction to this inter-caste marriage, but with a degree of conceit and sarcasm she wrote: 'The Bengalis can do nothing to the powerful. He had the law in his hands and so everybody feared him' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982:30).

With the 'Sepoy Mutiny of 1857', she felt that her days of happiness deserted her. Kishorichand lost his job on 28 October 1858. Kailashbashini claims that her husband had been delivered an inordinate punishment for an 'innocuous mistake' (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 31) but refrains from providing details. Manmatha Ghosh (1926: 118-40) writes that as a just, independent-minded and daring Junior Magistrate, Kishorichand, had passed judgements against the police at times. The Police Commissioner Mr. Wauchope conspired and reported against. A commission consisting of two Europeans and an Indian was set up to look into the case and it found Kishorichand guilty. The *Hindoo Patriot*, on 11 November, 1858 pointed out that it was a 'notorious fact' how the 'ministerial classes of native officials are dismissed, fined and suspended from office at the whim and pleasure of their immediate superior'(Cited in Ghosh 1980: 91-5).

There is silence over the everyday life of Kailashbashini for almost a decade and a half. We are told that Kishorichand remained severely ill for six

months and passed away on 6 August 1873 (*Calcutta Review*, Vol. 57, 1873: 273).The narrative being founded on the happiness of conjugal relationship, it was logical that the diary would not continue beyond the life of her husband. In a poignant and powerful passage, Kailashbashini carves out an anguished end to her own story:

> Oh readers, here my book ends! My life is over. Today, on 24 *Shravan* (August), thirteenth day of the moon, on the night of *Jhulan Jatra* at 11 o'clock, I immerse all my material happiness of the world. I die even when I am alive...I have returned as a widow from Shyambazar. The sound of widow shatters my heart like a thunderbolt. Oh Father of this world, why did you give me this name and how long will I have to bear this name in this country? I cannot withstand this pain. May this name of mine be soon reduced to dust (Kailashbashini Debi 1982: 37).

Beginning her record with the death of her son in 1846, Kailashbashini abruptly ends her narrative with the death of her husband and beginning of her widowhood at the age of forty-four. It is as if the solace provided by the companionate marriage made her live anew after the trauma of the death of the son. She died with the withdrawal of the comfort. Having led a loving marital life under the shadow of her husband, she turned reticent about the helpless life that dawns upon a Hindu widow. It is an irony of fate that Kailashbashini, who upheld ascetic widowhood, was prematurely pushed into a similar life of helpless loneliness. She might have espoused widowhood as an embodiment of traditional virtues, continuous self-denial and morally glorified valorisation of pain, but she could not bear its strain. She let go the reins of her life and her family since it was intertwined with that of her husband's.

Thus ends the tale of Kailashbashi about an extraordinary selfhood, which precariously balanced discrete parts of her being: one imbibed through rational education bestowed by her husband, and another, acquired through socio-cultural prescription. Yet another offered by her defiant selfhood that was apprehensive about the ethics of perverse Westernization.

Atmakatha (Story of My Life)

Unlike Kailashbashini's diary, Saradasundari Debi's autobiography is eloquently written in Bengali with the rhetorical force of the Sanskrit diction

and *tatsama* words. The tone of the narration is informal, confessional, and documentary. This brings us to the heart of the compound negotiations that an orally narrated autobiography brings with it. Incorporation of a male voice in the narration leading to male mediation in the constitution of the female-self destabilises the narrative purpose of Saradasundari Debi. It results in internalisation of the lexical and syntactical categorisations used in dominant male language despite Jogendralal's claim that: 'If at any place the use of a particular sentence brought about a disparity between her thought and the written expression, she did not sit still until it was corrected' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 5-6).

Quite contrary to the assertion of Jogendralal that Saradasundari 'did not allow even a speck of falsehood to creep in to the autobiography' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 6) one is struck by faultyrecollection, conflicting accounts, evasive silences, contradictions and discrepancies. One has to remember that omissions and manipulations are dependent on a specific culture's construction of what consists of truth and the rhetoric of truth telling (Ashley et al., 1994: 9, 57).Though autobiographies are perceived to be true accounts of the lived life, Jogendralal accepts that Saradasundari refrained from narrating events that were painful and would have hurt others, spoke only in the presence of her daughters and other relatives and made him promise that the biography would not be published during her lifetime and until long after her death (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 6).

We are here exposed to the complexity of autobiographical writing when the author is a woman, the 'cultural other.' Truth and authenticity being cultural constructions, there remains social pressure on a woman to conform to essentialised feminine propriety of suffering in silence out of thoughtfulness for others. Saradasundari's selectively remembered autobiography reveals the dialectic pull between a desire to defend the private secrets as well as to confess in public the inner truth. The fear of contempt from posterity and dispersed networks of power relations disallow her tale to tell all. Jogendralal adds that in congruence with the request of the elders, various parts of the autobiography have not even been published (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 6).Thus, the female autobiography is more prone to ambivalences, marginalia and silences than a male one(Whitlock 2000: 21-2; Ashley et al. 1994: 55-8, 68-9; Sturrock 1993: 136; Marcus 1998: 18; Ellis 2000: 106, 110).

Saradasundari did not possess a conscious organising perspective to lend continuity to discrete elements in her life. Since the act of recovering the past andre-presenting the tale of her life at the specific moment of

narrativisation did not come from within and had started at a time when memory did not remain her valuable companion, the narrative demonstrates doubtful fidelity to facts. As moments slide out of Saradasundari's consciousness, one finds misrememberings woven into the inconsistent narrative. The re-ordered life-story of Saradasundari does help making sense of her random experiences, events and emotions but does not provide a sense of unity and wholeness to the autobiographical self and the text.

The repetitive and fragmentary pattern of narration is worth mentioning. Beginning the narration at the age of 73 and engagement with the process of recollection for mere10 days, results in expansion of episodes thought importance and compression of events considered incidental. In the nine sessions narrated between 22 June, 1892 and 17 November, 1892 she deals with her natal and marital life, injustices meted out to her by her brother-in-laws after her widowhood; her pilgrimages; the marriages of her three daughters; the loss of dear ones – husband, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and eldest daughter. Surprisingly, she resumes her narration after 7 years and 9 months on August 1900 after braving a series of bereavements. On a single day she covers a huge vista—deaths in the family; her relation with her sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, grand daughters-in-law; her hallucinations after Keshab's death and the role of God in her life. She emphasises upon the division of affinal property and the Cooch Behar marriage of her granddaughter, Maharani Suniti Debi. Meetings with Ramkrishna Paramhansadeb and Lady Dufferin find special mention.

Almost as a convention, the patriarchal framework of autobiographies postulates a beginning with familial and communal stories of the self. However, Saradasundari devotes just about a dozen sentences about her provenance. Her tale begins with her birth in 1819 at her maternal uncle's place. We are told that she was born in Garifa in the Hooghly district to a doctor named Gourhari Das who was deeply religious. The relegation of the natal family and lineage to obscurity goes hand in hand with the social injunction that the woman's real affiliation is not with her natal family but with the matrimonial one. Bereft of parental or matrimonial right to land inheritance, the privileges, authority and power that class and caste confer upon a man, Saradasundari might have thought it proper not to claim an identity that lineage, caste and class bestow. This sparse account of her childhood days could also be due to the fact that lives of women perforce are devoid of boundaries and settled identities. The knowledge of her forbears, earliest influences and memories of childhood which tend to shape the adult life of a man, does not influence the feminine self in the same

fashion because early marriage and the ensuing burden of domesticity placed too soon on young shoulders, make the span of childhood shorter.

Her recollection truly begins with her marriage, tyrannical regime of hard-labour in the conjugal home and her anxiety as a child bride. The rationale for beginning at a juncture of life which endows one with a sense of alienation and terrifying prospect of forced translocation in a new place and family might have been adopted by her to explicate the profound uncertainty of both marriage and memory. She disapproves child marriage that compounds the ordeal of the child bride:

> I was very frightened before going to my in-laws' home. I used to think that I would be put into jail or even hung. Thinking of all this, I cried for a month before the wedding. Finally, when my father forcefully took me to my in-laws' place, I felt as though I had been thrown into an ocean. For long I believed that the dictates of Hindu religion was the best. But now I think it is better to get girls married after they have matured to some extent. Then they do not have to put up with so many disadvantages (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 7).

The new family dynamics was laden with power struggle with the authoritarian mother-in-law at the helm. Exercising considerable disciplining power, the mother-in-law took an instant disliking to Saradasundari assuming her to be older than ten years of age. Saradasundari recounts how after the day-long drudgery she was admonished for her desire to play. Rather than punishing Saradasundari on her own, either as a willing or an unwitting comprador of patriarchy,the mother-in-law reported all her mistakes to the father-in-law Ramkamal Sen (1783-1844) who chastised her.

There remains gap between Saradasundari's conjugal experiences and her ability to voice it. She says less about her husband Pearymohan Sen (1814-48) compared to the detailed discussion on her father-in-law Ramkamal Sen who was a *diwan* (finance secretary) under Dr. Wilson at the Calcutta Mint (1828) and the Bank of Bengal (1809). We are told that Pearymohan worked at the Agency House of Baig. Social inhibition, shame and feminine timidity made her shy away from asking for money from Pearymohan even when he brought boxes full of it: 'I never asked for money for fear that he might think that I come from a family of paupers who had never seen money and hence I was asking out of greed' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 10). Soon the agency house incurred huge financial loss. The debt

was repaid after he started working in the Calcutta Mint two/three years after Ram Kamal's death.

Perhaps out of enforced modesty and obligatory silence about conjugal relationship in a joint family, it was only after poignant description of Pearymohan's last hour that Saradasundari dedicates a small section on his commendable attributes. She notes that he was a 'good looking,' 'exceptionally charitable,' highly religious Vaishnav. He could draw beautifully, was a bird-lover and was interested in wrestling. As regards his educational achievement she says that he got a gold medal in the examination of the Hindu College. Not only was he good in English, Bengali, Sanskrit and Persian, he could also skilfully play a number of musical instruments like Harmonium, Esraj, Pakhwaj and Sitar (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 13-4). Devoid of opportunity to acquire education in her youth she proudly declares her husband to be her guide (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 7) Such an education imparted at night gave it a degree of legitimacy and helped building a new form of conjugal intimacy. She writes that he had beautiful handwriting and asked her to follow his style of writing. However, talking of inability to write, she notes: 'Through disuse I have forgotten to write, but I can still read' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 11)

The absence of the husband as protector made Saradasundari's position in the joint family vulnerable. After two weeks of his death, she began to live in mortal fear of being thrown out along with her children since the Dayabhaga School of property rights in Bengal did not give a widow absolute right over the land of her husband. All she was entitled to was its maintenance. She showed a marked ambiguity towards material possessions. When the eldest son Nabin Chandra implored her to stay back till the distribution of movable assets, she sternly replied: 'Be it your disaster, be it your property, I shall not stay' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 14). Hardened by family feuds over property she later voiced her inner dissatisfactions and challenged the subservient acceptance of normative codes of a virtuous self-effacing widow whose fulfilment admittedly lay in martyrdom in conjugal family. A series of deprivations led her to defend her rights while her brother-in-law tried to cheat her of her share. Her ability to competently guide her sons in property matters shows her thorough understanding of the legal and administrative structures regarding property deals (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 26-7).

The successive deaths of her husband, eldest daughter Brajeshwari and her mother-in-law made her seek solace in pilgrimages to Ganga Sagar, Puri, Kashi, Prayag, Vrindaban, Mathura, Vindhyachal stretching over a

span of 45 years. Interestingly, five sessions on pilgrimages covering a quarter of the narrative deal more with the thrill of her adventurous exploits and less with her religious venture in these sites. Daily humiliations in a painfully constricted familial milieu deprived her of a self-respecting existence and made her seek succour in the expanse of the sylvan beauty of the variegated natural world. For a woman who lived within the confines of *antahpur* for about three decades of her life, Saradasundari displayed unusual self-confidence, adaptability, persistence when she found her life's meaning in the expanse of the outside world. Pilgrimage, apart from being an approved antidote to rousing of physical desire also gave women confidence to assert control over their lives and exercise a spirit of independence. Saradasundari with other women of the group took decisions as to the places to be visited, the duration of the period of stay at each place—agential roles which were denied to widows under domestic captivity. One can fathom the transformation of Saradasundari from a humble, selfless pilgrim to an insightful traveller.

That the introspective self-fashioning of identity through autobiography involves a journey of self-realisation is borne out by the narrative. The recast and recomposed past, in this narrative, charts out the continual process of Saradasundari's becoming: the changing states of mind, her stepping out of the rut of Hindu orthodoxy and carving of a distinctive individual faith. Her metaphysical proclivity and philosophical introspection are dovetailed to open-minded rationality. Her detachment and scepticism made her criticise her past religious fervour. She considers her action in Puri of lying on the road holding the rope of the chariot during the *rath yatra* with the belief of acquiring *punya* as 'childlike.' She even feels that Lord Gobinda/Krishna stopped her from entering the temple of Gobindaji in Jaipur. Her mature and inquisitive mind made her lose her previous zeal to see the Absolute Brahman in idolatrous form. When asked as to why she went for pilgrimages despite being the mother of Keshab Chandra, she retorts, 'Pilgrimages are ancient in origin – they are the God's realm, what is the harm in seeing them?' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 25). She likens her love for pilgrimages to her love for her children and relatives devoid of expectation. As if to vindicate her stand on idolatry she elucidates that salvation could be achieved either by idolatrous devotion to Krishna/Gobinda/ Hari or by merger with the Universal Absolute Brahman or through the intimate attainment of His lotus feet as a mark of subordination (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 17).

A noteworthy feature of the narrative is Saradasundari's ambiguity towards notions of ritual purity, pollution and commensality norms which were crucial for upholding caste hierarchy for upper class/caste Hindus in nineteenth-century Bengal. The closeness that she developed with maids and guards made her eat with. Once the daughter of her Kaibarta (intermediate lowly caste)maid came running to her while she was eating and joined her. Saradasundari added: 'I did not have any hesitation in my mind, though some people chided me.' The Vaishnava guru of the Sen household who was accompanying these women refused to eat with them for subverting caste-based customs. Later at the prospect of being left behind he quickly ate the leftovers and forgot about his protests. While the likelihood of censure for violating caste norms did not deter Sardasundari she was caught within her inherited social location when it came to marriage negotiation. She writes of her disapproval when her grandsons married out of caste (Saradasundari Debi 1982:38).

In the tenth session, Saradasundari talks about her children - Nabin Chandra, Keshab Chandra, Krishna Behari, Brajeshwari, Phuleshwari, Chuni and Panna - and grandchildren. Her anecdotes of Keshab Chandra begin with the absence of a proper lying-in-room during his birth. She recollects that the room was so unhygienic that Keshab suffered from stomach swelling right after birth. He suffered from epilepsy from the age of nine to eleven. All she could recall about Keshab Chandra's academic and professional life is that he studied in Hindu College, worked in the Bank of Bengal and in the Calcutta Mint. A reconciliatory refrain reverberates as Saradasundari tries to prove that Keshab was not far from Vaishnavite Hinduism, thereby re-appropriating him for the Hindu fold. Conspicuous is her revelation that the Vaishnava guru approved of Keshab's conversion to Brahmo faith; that all through his life Keshab chanted the name of Hari and counted the beads of rosary (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 30-3). On 13 April, 1862, Keshab Chandra transgressed the norms of spatial segregation of women by taking his wife to the Tagore household at Jorasanko for *Maghotsab*. However, Saradasundari unceremoniously refers to this event of historic importance (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 27). Perhaps due to her own ambivalence towards Keshab's iconoclastic acts, Saradasundari refrains from commenting on Keshab's public life with the statement: 'about his youth and mature age much has been said already that need not be repeated' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 30). Either out of a conscious subversive strategy for manipulation of facts or as an evasive mechanism against disagreeable memories, or out of consideration for popular acceptance, or to project a certain public image of Keshab Chandra for posterity, she refused to write

in details about the controversial marriage of Suniti Debi to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar that brought about a schism between *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* and *Naba Bidhan Brahmo Samaj* (Borthwick 1977; Kopf 1979). She retorts: 'Many have written on it. There is no need to repeat it again' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 36-7).

Along with her religious belief, marriage negotiations dealt on the seventh and eight sessions hold an important place in the account. She resents authoritarianism of elderly members of the joint family who habitually asserted their will in marriage negotiations. Saradasundari says that her eldest-daughter Brajeshwari's engagement and ostentatious marriage are the only happy days in her entire life. Since her brother-in-law and mother-in-law were instrumental in deciding weddings in the family thereafter, she begrudges the loss of her agential role. Her wish was also respected during the marriage of her youngest daughter Chuni. On a note of pride, she comments: "Since resources lay in the hands of my elder brother-in-law, the expenditure was handled by him *but I chose the partner*"(italics mine) (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 20). Saradasundari's choice for Keshab's bride was thwarted twice by her brother-in-law. Finally, Keshab was married at the age of eighteen to eight-year-old Jaganmohini of Bali in 1856 who according to Saradasundari was 'not beautiful,' 'small', 'thin', and 'insignificant' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 20-1). Almost justifying male proclivity for polygamy in nineteenth-century Bengal, she was unhesitant in declaring that it would not have been unnatural if Keshab took another wife. She deliberately trivialises her discussion on other daughters-in-law: 'The daughters-in-law came from different families. Married to my sons, their influence transformed them into better women' (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 38). Saradasundari might be avenging the subjection in her youth as a daughter-in-law when she herself ascended in the age and power hierarchy.

The octogenarian Saradasundari concludes the narrative describing her present state in relation to joys and sorrows in her affinal and natal family. It bears traces of philosophical introspection, stoic detachment and restraint. A life lived mostly for others, is ungrudgingly surrendered to the inscrutable mercy of the Ultimate Absolute Other and uncertainties and ambiguities of fate. Describing her relationship with God who as a benevolent creator makes and as a devious destroyer unmakes life, she writes:

> At regular intervals I receive news of happiness and grief from my family. My God does not let me dwell in absolute bliss or complete misery. He is testing me through joys and

> sorrows to help me rise above these… the tidings of joy do not elevate me nor do news of sorrow upset me. I look at it all as a divine play and sitting in the midst of this populous family I shed tears with one of my eyes and laugh with another (Saradasundari Debi 1982: 40).

Saradasundari thus conceives her own life and the *sansar* as a 'divine play' or *leela* of God bestowing it with fulfilment and frustration, pleasure and pain rendering her character with fullness.

Conclusion

The imagining of self by Kailashbashini is entirely relational in nature. In all probability, she maintained her diary because her husband maintained one. Though a woman of determination equipped to steer her fate, Kailashbashini lacks control over life and destiny and succumbs to either male prescriptions, or inscrutable destiny. Her husband was the fulcrum of her existence and she wrote about twenty-seven years of her conjugal life. A fulfilling marriage being her reason for self-creation and her self-invention being in relation to her husband, she shied away from writing about the self, devoid of the masculine presence. However, the fact that Kailashbashini wrote as freely on her friendship with her husband, as of her agony over his lack of self-restraint in the last few years, is an indication of a degree of candour quite radical for a Hindu woman of those times.

Selfhood and identity constructed by Saradasundari is determined by her understanding of her positioning in the gender hierarchy. In a single life-span Saradasundari had to carry out intricate negotiations and manoeuvres to meet varied requirements and purposes in marital/maternal roles. Saradasundari lived all facets of culturally inscribed identities in a joint family ridden with rivalry - subjugated childbride, a compliant daughter-in-law, a devoted wife, an oppressed widow, an understanding mother. She realised the futility of such subject positions. She suffered the agonies of such existences, navigated the turbulence of domesticity, motherhood and widowhood and broke the feminine propriety of silence. Empowering herself with speech, she as an autonomous subject publicly articulated her private emotions, feelings and frustrations questioning the very identities that instead of guaranteeing a secured social existence as they ought to have, oppressed her all the more.

While Saradasundari surpassed the ideological constriction of Hindu wifehood and sculpted a defiant, dissident identity only after the death of her husband, Kailashbashini desiring a social identity as a sentimental, devoted wife, her life was emptied of its fortune after Kishorichand's death. The premature end of the relationship that was perceived to lend fullness to her being, made Saradasundari question the stability of social conventions. Widowhood made Saradasundari break the shackles of wifely confinement and choose an independent life. For Kailashbashini, widowhood ended the meaning of life. Kailashbashini had invented herself through marital love and the ensuing freedom, position, and authority that empowered her to speak. The end of this life led to a complete disruption that made her abandon the project to write her life story.

In both the texts under review, one witnesses the inner tussles within Hinduism as well as between the former and Brahmoism. Kailasbashini's and Saradasundari's reflections on religion and faith make them atypical women of the times, endowed with inquisitive minds of their own. Their exposure to the world beyond *antahpur* made them unafraid in disclosing their inner inconsistencies, doubts, distresses. Embedded in the history of nineteenth century Bengal, 'her story'(Mukherjee 1993: 71-85) is candid enough to critically appraise the times, assess the efficacy of social changes that rocked the lives of myriads of people, critique social relations and appeal for socio-cultural changes.

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