

UNLETTERED VOICES: IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN TWO ORAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF BENGAL

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Abstract. There have been numerous studies to examine the modes of narration available to and adopted by autobiographers. A cursory reading of the works by theorists of autobiography clearly identifies two different schools: one which focuses on the contract between reader and writer; and the other which considers “self” as something which is constructed in and through the narrative. The autobiographical entity includes all three identities: the author, the narrator and the protagonist. It rethinks autobiography as an institutionalized communicative act where author and reader enter into a particular ‘contract’—the “autobiographical pact”—sealed by the triple reference of the same proper name. In some autobiographies by Bengali women, published during the colonial era, an additional entity is detected which further complicates the already precarious alchemy between the author, narrator and protagonist trio. This, in turn, affects the reliability and sanctity of the autobiographical pact.

Keshabjanani Debi Saradasundarir Atmakatha by Saradasundari Debi and *Sekele Katha* by Nistarini Debi may be classified under such a category of autobiographical writing where the traditional theoretical models are found inadequate to evaluate the narrative mode. In both these books, the readers are provided access to the author’s narration through the words scribbled down by mediators. Although these mediators claim to have remained true to the original narration, a close reading of the texts raises questions about authorial agency, voice, and identity, and how these elements serve as pointers to the larger context of social censorship as well as domestic suppression.

Keywords: Oral Autobiography, Narrative Mediation, Colonial Bengali Women, Gender, Indigenous Literature.

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*A tale begun in other days,
 When summer suns were glowing —
 A simple chime, that served to time
 The rhythm of my rowing —
 Whose echoes live in memory yet,
 Though envious years would say 'forget'. (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*)*

1. Introduction

There have been numerous studies to examine the different modes of narration available to and adopted by autobiographers. A cursory reading of the works by theorists of autobiography clearly identifies two different schools: one which focuses on the contract between reader and writer; and the other which considers “self” as something which is constructed in and through the narrative. Philippe Lejeune’s theory of “autobiographical pact” rethinks autobiography as an institutionalized communicative act where the author and reader enter into a “contract”. The autobiographical entity includes all three identities: the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. “Autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes that there is identity of name between the author (such as s/he figures, by name, on the cover), the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 12). The simultaneous publication of Robyn R. Warhol’s “Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot” and Susan S. Lanser’s “Toward a Feminist Narratology” in 1986 problematized the applicability of existing theories to women’s writings. While Warhol talks about the relationship between narratee and actual reader in engaging narrative (Warhol, 1986, p. 812), Lanser examines “whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women’s texts” (Lanser, 1986, p. 342).

John Sturrock, in his essay “Theory Versus Autobiography,” discusses the limitations of existing theories of narratology which delegate an inferior status to the genre altogether. He makes an interesting observation there: “Autobiography is the record of a singularization. In reflecting on his life, the autobiographer traces the purposeful, seemingly anticipated course of his own separation out from others, his escape from among the great mass of the anonymous” (Sturrock, 1993, p. 27). However, even Sturrock’s attempt to assign a superior position to the genre suffers from a serious limitation. He takes it for granted that the autobiographer’s life is an assertion of “singularity”. From this perspective, any

study of autobiography presupposes the validity of authorial agency and tries to figure out the complexities contained within the author-narrator-reader pact accordingly.

In some autobiographies by Bengali women published during the colonial era, an additional entity is detected which further complicates the already precarious alchemy among the author, narrator and protagonist. This, in turn, affects the reliability and sanctity of the autobiographical pact. This additional entity may be called a mediator, or a scribe, who stands between the one who narrates and the one who reads. A close look at these cases reveals a disturbing reality that must be considered before any conclusive idea is formed about these autobiographies in general. Any narrative, even an auto-diegetic one, presupposes a voice, which may not necessarily be a consistent or uniform one. However, in both mono-vocal and poly-vocal narratives, there is usually an assertion of authority, an author who is in control of the narrative voice(s). Locating the position of the speaking voice is an important critical concern, for it interrogates the idea of power associated with the agent of articulation.

Keshabjanani Debi Saradasundarir Atmakatha by Saradasundari Debi and *Sekele Katha* by Nistarini Debi may be classified under such a category of autobiographical writing where the traditional theoretical models are found inadequate to evaluate the narrative mode. In both these books, the readers are provided access to the author's narration through the words scribbled down by mediators. Although these mediators claim to have remained true to the original narration, a close reading of the texts raises questions about the author's agency, voice, and identity, and how these elements serve as pointers to the larger context of social censorship as well as domestic suppression. To borrow Robert Folkenflik's term, autobiographies (especially the oral narratives) from marginalized sections of the Third World serve as vehicles of "bottom-up historiography" (Folkenflik, 1993, p. 12). Sturrock's concept of "singularization" is in direct conflict with this idea of autobiography as a genre with democratic potential and the validation of narratives by almost anonymous and forgotten subjects.

The study of oral autobiographies is a neglected territory, primarily because it lacks the semblance of authenticity and reliability that a self-written life-story represents. Men in colonial Bengal had access to education; they did not require any mediator to write for them. However, all women were not allowed that privilege. Consequently, oral autobiographies became an almost exclusively female tradition, not as a narrative option but as a narrative compulsion. Oral autobiography is self-contradictory, for it subverts the meaning

of auto-diegesis. There is, however, a different light in which these narratives deserve serious study. These narratives are unique markers of the speaking voice's negotiation with the process of reaching the reader through a veil of another human being's consciousness. Therefore, more than the facts narrated in the autobiographies, these negotiations become tools of a historiographer. These narratives are set in the form of interviews, seldom offering the time to prepare eloquent passages about memories recollected in tranquillity, catching the narrator off-guard at times, focusing on cues often supplied by the mediator. The contradictions, hesitations, and inhibitions of the narrator help shape the author's profile in the eyes of the readers as much as the anecdotes and instances she mentions. In written autobiographies, the reader can only reach the narrative self and, depending on the reliability of narration, frame an idea about the author. In oral narratives, the author's persona emerges independent of her narrative self.

2. Saradasundari Debi: Orality, Piety, and Self-Justification

Saradasundari Debi was the mother of Keshab Chandra Sen, a renowned orator and founder of the *Navavidhan* (New Dispensation) *Brahma Samaj*. Interestingly, the first word in the title of his mother's autobiography is "*Keshabjanani*", "The Mother of Keshab". It is as if, at the very onset, Saradasundari's own self is set as secondary to her status as a mother. It may be argued that such a title was considered appropriate because readers were more familiar with her son's name and it was wiser for the publisher to choose this title. Yet, somehow, the title shows that the life story of Saradasundari is thought significant primarily through her connection with Keshabchandra Sen. Saradasundari's autobiography was not written by herself but was recorded by Jogendralal Khastagir, the husband of Saradasundari's granddaughter Saralasundari. The narrative spans a period of about eighty years, covering almost the whole of Saradasundari's long and eventful life. The mode of narration is essentially oral and therefore lacks continuity and sequentiality. Saradasundari leaps from milestones to milestones of her life, or what her memory certified as milestones. Examining these milestones, one may have an idea about how Saradasundari negotiated with memory and forgetfulness, to choose those events of her life which she considered to be worthy of narration.

The narrative commences with the birth of Saradasundari. She follows the traditional mode of writing autobiography by providing a semblance of temporal definiteness. It was not expected in those times to have an exact record of a girl child's time or date of birth. However, as the narrative unfolds itself, the readers get an idea as to why this exactness was so important for Saradasundari. "My mother-in-law was a good person,

but short-tempered,” she continues, “It was my misfortune that she did not like me at first, perhaps because of my faults. She believed that I was far older than ten years” (S. Debi, 2013, pp. 31–32). There was the rising trend of competition regarding the early marriage of daughters and thus a new system had gained popularity: the “*Gouridan Pratha*”. According to this, girls must be married off within eight years of age. There was immense pressure on parents of a girl child to find a suitable match for their growing daughter. Consequently, they even had to hide their child’s age to buy themselves some more time to avoid being outcast. It was a common practice for the in-laws to use this as an excuse to get an upper hand and subjugate the young girl when they could find no other fault in her. Interestingly, the forces of indoctrination were so powerful that the girl in question found nothing objectionable in this and rather attempted to seek justification of such ill-founded bias. “It was perhaps my own fault” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 32). We can understand why she wanted to be so particular about her age when she began her narrative.

The first part of Saradasundari’s narrative deals with how she spent her early days at her marital home. She mostly states facts concerning the prominent male members of her family, focusing mostly on her father-in-law, and how his personality occupied her entire consciousness: “Though he was a wealthy and worldly person, his innermost core was filled with detachment... He lived within *samsar* but *samsar* couldn’t grasp him” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 34). It is seen that Saradasundari’s attitude to her son’s religious preferences was conditioned by her reverence for the Vaishnav tradition practiced with fervour by her father-in-law. In short, what we gather from the first part of her narrative hardly relates to Saradasundari as an individual. She places herself deliberately within a domestic frame, chalking out the defining borders of her experience. It is as if her identity was dependent on how she measured up in other people’s expectations.

Unlike Rassundari, Saradasundari did not have a direct access to any form of written literature. Her affinity towards the Vaishnavite culture brought her under an indirect influence of Carit or hagiographic writings on the life of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. However, her narrative is not directly presented by her on paper but is refracted through the mediator. This approach in autobiography is an expected outcome of having a mediator or scribe. The style adopted by the narrator is a conversational one, trying to set up a tone of comfortable familiarity. However, the narrator is constantly preoccupied with whether to mention or omit a detail to be in tune with the scribe. The autobiographical pact between author and reader is subverted to accommodate a more immediate pact: between the narrator and the

mediator. A thesaurus equates “scribe” with “illuminator.” This is significant in this context, since the scribe is, by default, allotted a superior position because of his superiority in terms of education and gender.

This is the primary reason why Saradasundari can never be consistent even in her complaints. She begins her narration by commenting on the evil practice of child-marriage prevalent during the times: *For a long time, I was convinced that all our Hindu laws were appropriate, but now, from what I understand, I feel that marriage must take place when girls are older, for then one would not have to suffer all these fears. When I first came to my father-in-law's house, I felt my blood drying out whenever I looked at anyone. I feared about what they would say.* (S. Debi, 2013, p. 31)

Even when she voices out against a character, she tries to compensate at once. She complains about the lack of opportunities for women to educate themselves and quickly adds that the girls themselves were not inclined to get educated. Among the various virtues that she catalogues about her husband, she mentions his open-mindedness: “Since there was no scope elsewhere, he himself taught me every night” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 36). It was not expected that a husband would take up the trouble of educating his own wife, let alone in broad daylight. In any case, her husband's death put a stop to her nocturnal classes, and her ability to write dwindled off to oblivion. Interestingly, her son was a prominent member of the *Brahmo Samaj*, which was instrumental in propagating female education in Bengal. However, Saradasundari lacked Rassundari's determined zeal to educate herself any further.

This tendency to suppress any urge to openly speak against social norms is unique to women writers in general, with very few exceptions. Julia Kristeva makes an important observation in her essay “Woman Can Never Be Defined”: *Because of the decisive role that women play in the reproduction of the species, and because of the privileged relationship between father and daughter, a woman takes social constraints even more seriously, has fewer tendencies toward anarchism, and is more mindful of ethics.* (Kristeva, 2006, p. 268)

Although there is no direct note of complaint in her words against her husband or their conjugal life, she was clearly exhausted by continuous childbirths. She became a mother at the age of thirteen and within the next thirteen years she had become a mother of seven children. There is hardly any mention of the discomforts and pain that she had felt during these difficult times. The only time she mentions timidly about such problems was when she speaks of Keshabchandra's birth: “The room was on the way to the lavatory. Since

Nabin was very ill, a delivery room was not prepared. So Keshab was born in that room. The room was such that he fell ill just after his birth” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 61). These statements are pointers to the unhygienic practices that were adopted during childbirth in even the so-called sophisticated urban households. Faint notes of complaint are first noticed when Saradasundari talks about her experiences immediately after her husband’s death: *Within fifteen days of my husband’s death, my third brother-in-law started to ill-treat me. He broke open the door of the second-floor room and took away my husband’s bed; I wept.* (S. Debi, 2013, p. 41)

However, she could not protest such atrocities because she felt responsible for causing grief to her mother-in-law. What is worse, she even found comfort in trying to justify such cruelties: “I told myself, that they took away what was their brother’s why should I be sad? I did not bring those things from my father’s house” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 41).

Before the late eighteenth century, women had little legal protection concerning property rights or inheritance. Saradasundari had become a widow in the year 1848. Neither she nor her children had any legal assurance of economic security. The Indian Succession Act came into force in 1865 and allowed a widow certain legal rights over a portion of her deceased husband’s property (Indian Succession Act, 1865, pp. 16–17). Saradasundari talks about her later plights and insecurities as she, along with her children, was repeatedly deprived of her rights. She talks about her fears of being thrown out of the household: “I used to shut myself up along with my children most of the time in one of the rooms. I thought if they drove me and my children away from this house, where would I go?” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 41). While she writes about the inhuman behaviour of her younger brother-in-law, she tries to make amends by mentioning the comfort offered by her husband’s elder brother Horimohon Sen, “Let Bangshi take those shawls, I’ll buy you new ones” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 41). However, as the narrative progresses, she fails to conceal her disappointment with Horimohon as well. Horimohon called off the wedding between Keshabchandra and the daughter of Srinath Majumder on the grounds that her grandfather was responsible for his father’s heartbreak and fatal asthma which took his life. Horimohon called off the next wedding arrangement as well since the girl was very beautiful and he decided to get her married to his own son instead. He even seized every opportunity to utilize every penny he spent for Sarada or her children: “I wanted to have my son seated in a separate silver palanquin on the day of the dance. But that wish was not fulfilled. On that day he (Horimohon) had his son to share the seat of celebrations with Keshab” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 52).

In his foreword, Jogendralal Khastagir writes, “She used to narrate actual incidents but, in a way, that it would not hurt anybody” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 18). He mentions how Saradasundari had requested him never to publish her life-story, thinking that it would be of no use. Perhaps, her request was not just because of her lack of self-worth, but more because of her apprehensions about its reception and how her narration could generate unfavourable impressions about her loved ones. Interestingly, Jogendralal confesses that he had omitted certain portions of the narrations during publication “at the request of many elders” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 22). The readers are left in the dark about what those omitted sections held, but they are certainly made aware that the authority of narration and the agency of representation had transferred from the narrator to the mediator.

What appears from Saradasundari’s accounts is a tone of despair not strong enough to transform into active protests. Saradasundari was well aware that her position in her marital home was dependent on her male relatives. She had understood that home was not a place which could provide her with any comfort. Her narrative mostly contains detailed accounts of her *Tirthayatra* or pilgrimages spanning over forty-four years. Interestingly, these journeys began after her husband’s death and were prompted not so much by religious impulses as by a desire to escape the sufferings of the household. Deeply religious as these accounts are, they are not devoid of lively anecdotes and observations. Her first few journeys reflect her devotion to the Vaishnavite cult while the later pilgrimages show her greater sympathies with the *Brahmo* ideologies that shun idolatry. In one of her visits to Kurukshetra, she was asked if she was going against the ideologies of her son by going on pilgrimages since every major pilgrimage essentially propagated idol worship, she replied: “These are holy places, there’s no harm in coming here” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 57). She makes a very important statement elsewhere, “Now I go for pilgrimages too but not for want of any merit. Pilgrimages are acts of virtue, I understand. But now I go out of love. I love to go on pilgrimages, and perform other religious rites in the way I love my children and my near ones” (S. Debi, 2013, p. 45). This is how she can assert her individuality. A lifetime of exposure that her numerous pilgrimages offered her had expanded her horizon of thought.

There is a gap of seven years in the narrative. Because of Jogendralal’s temporary absence and death of Krishnabihari having caused a major trauma to Saradsundari, the writing was disrupted till 1900. There is a noticeable change in narrative style from this point onward. While the earlier sections follow a chronological pattern, the second section, written in 1900, follows a thematic pattern. She simply narrates about her various children and their achievements and expresses grief for their deprivation. There are moments when she

emerges as an open-minded woman despite her lack of education. She accepted her son's decision to marry a girl whom he loved although the only acceptable practice of the times was a marriage arranged by the parents or elders. Her tone is clearly filled with humour when she recounts the incident: "It was a marriage of a new kind" (S. Debi, 2013, p. 68). On the other hand, there are moments when she is not seen to be any different from her oppressors. Speaking about her daughters-in-law, she is not very enthusiastic to praise them at all: "My daughters-in-law came from different families. In their union with my sons they gradually acquired the good qualities my sons possessed" (S. Debi, 2013, p. 75).

There is, therefore, a dual impulse to complain against and conform to the codes of domesticity that bound her down all her life. It can never be found out for sure whether the presence of the mediator facilitated or obstructed her narrative flow, but it definitely acted as a significant element. We see that Saradasundari recounted her whole life under certain heads such as "My Widowhood and Sufferings", "Religious Ideology", "My Daughter Chuni's Wedding", "Pilgrimages", "Accident", "Distribution of Property", "My Children", "Keshabchandra", "Directives and Vision", "Krishnabihari", "Maharani Suniti", "Wedding at Kuchbihar", "Daughters in Law", "Preacher", "Granddaughters-in-law", "Ramkrishna Paramhansa" and "Lady Dufferin". The subtitles do not follow any pattern or sequence. The lengths of the chapters also vary significantly from three to one hundred sentences. It looks as if the narration was prompted by specific questions or cues provided by the mediator. In the beginning of the chapter "Division of Property", she clearly says: "You want to know about my domestic life, but I must say that I don't remember everything clearly" (S. Debi, 2013, p. 58). Towards the end of her narrative, Saradasundari again makes a direct address to the mediator: *You wanted to know about my present condition...There are around 100 members in my own family. In this huge family there are instances of joy and sorrow every day* (S. Debi, 2013, p. 77).

Until the very end, therefore, she remains rooted within her domestic sphere. Her life is nothing more than her home and her kinsmen. No wonder her story of life can only accommodate her figure with respect to her relationship with her home, with the faintest glimpse of an outside world of pilgrimage which allowed her to assert her identity and realize her individuality.

3. Nistarini Debi: Mediation, Surveillance, and Narrative Resistance

With Nistarini Debi, the question of narrative voice gets even more elusive. Published in the form of episodic anecdotes, her narrative spans over almost a century. Unlike Saradasundari, Nistarini never stayed in her marital home. In fact, she never had a home to call

her own. Her life story chronicles an incredible series of dislocation, a ceaseless quest for home. She tries to offer a grand genealogical map across multiple generations to establish her social standing. However, with the progress of the narrative it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track of her relatives since she follows no fixed chronology or pattern. She does not mention all of her family members and often uses general words such as “mejo bhaipo”, “chhoto bhaji” instead of using proper names. Therefore, what appears in the beginning as a systematic charting of lineage eventually disintegrates into a delirious spontaneity correlating perfectly with her growing anxiety of homelessness. Following the conventions of society, she refers to her husband using the polite and revered subject-pronoun “*tini*”. However, the manner in which she describes him has covert sarcastic connotations: *He believed that my family would provide every month for his household. What a shame! You know why we refer to husbands as “tini”? We refer to God as “tini”. Our husbands are our God, our everything.* (N. Debi, 2013, p. 147)

Her memories of her husband primarily concern with his uselessness. He had neither wealth nor vigour. The picture we get is one of insubstantiality, nothing justifies the idea of divinity forced on the minds of women like Nistarini. She could not even claim exclusivity of suffering since she was only one among the countless wives that her husband was wedded to because of the prevalent “Kulina Pratha”. Her cohabitation lasted only a brief period: *I became a widow when I was fourteen. I was married when I was nine or ten. My husband stayed at our house for a year after the wedding. And later, crippled by his ailing spleen, he had stayed for ten or twelve days. I was not fortunate enough to enjoy my husband’s company.* (N. Debi, 2013, p. 156)

Malavika Karlekar gives a comprehensive account of the origin and prevalence of the Kulin Polygamy tradition in Bengal, first by King Adisara and later by King Ballal Sen of Bengal, showing how this tradition became a tool of subjugation in the hands of chosen Brahmin men: *Though polygamy and serial monogamy were common in many parts of India, nowhere did it result in situations of a man having dozens of wives of varying ages and lineage statuses. Apart from the obvious issue of the burden of asymmetrical gift-giving, the institution of Kulin polygamy raised some very interesting questions for the status of the married woman, her place of residence, rights to matrimonial property and so on.* (Karlekar, 1995, p. 6)

How Nistarini’s, or for that matter Saradasundari’s accounts become powerful tools for social historiography is a separate question. This chapter primarily attempts to look at the ways in which these women negotiated with the resources available to them, the methods

they adopted and the medium they appropriated in telling their tales. In both cases, there is a noticeable oscillation detected between resistance and surrender, between agency and oblivion, between the urge to voice out and the fear of being heard. In one place Nistarini shows her disapproval of the changing times: *It was forbidden in those times to see our husbands during the day. There is heaven and hell difference between shyness of those times and that of today. Nowadays, shyness is something external, back then it resided within the heart. Now we see westernized shyness—a decorum, that looks like manners.* (N. Debi, 2013, p. 154)

Elsewhere, she does not hesitate to accept social change: *Why should these boys, whose father married twice and his wives cohabited peacefully and raised children who regarded their stepmothers as their own—whose grandfather had 56 wives, whose great grandfather married 108 times—why should they be scared of getting married!... I think only what is good and true remains; all that is evil and false, no matter which society it resides in, never remains forever.* (N. Debi, 2013, p. 170)

However, she tries to find some justification in the codes of society which only show her eagerness to validate her own suffering as well as offer an ideological compensation for having voiced out at all. Voicing out, from her perspective, amounted to an act of transgression in itself: *Those days, although some people followed the alien culture secretly, no one dared to openly hit hard on the face of society. Society never interferes if you go to hell in private. A mother will always secretly feed her prodigal son on the doorsteps when he starves; so does society, like a good mother, not count the wrongs of its children, but one could never openly disregard society then. Society was not made of a single man. The society was responsible for many people's purity. Social norms were also useful for people in general.*

This constant switch of perspective is a natural outcome of Nistarini's continuous self-fashioning. Unlike Saradasundari, Nistarini does not directly address the mediator as an individual, but as a class, as a representative of the changed times. She is torn between her impulse to protest against the atrocities that she has faced all her life and the self-imposed obligation of vindicating the same social rules that had been responsible for her subjugation: *If you educate your wife a little and then ask her to tutor the child, then automatically she gets educated—our countrymen do not understand this simple thing and end up turning women into teachers without getting them married.* (N. Debi, 2013, p. 174)

Such a strange recommendation for the parallel education of child and mother is striking. However, this realization is not a result of any introspection on Nistarini's part but a wholly personal reaction to ill-treatment that she experienced in the hands of her nephew's educated wife who clearly made her feel inferior, "She was literate, mistress of the household, why should she regard me!" (N. Debi, 2013, p. 175). It is noted that she never protests against the conditions that had kept her illiterate and rather tried to have some consolation in trying to find fault with the whole movement of women's education in colonial Bengal.

Nistarini narrates a tale of deprivation but ends with a note of almost defiant acceptance. Alienated from every relative, blind and weakened by old age, Nistarini still finds strength in her acceptance of her lot even in exile: "I am Kalicharan's elder sister. Even when no one bothers about my hunger, I am familiar with starvation. I only wish any one of you could make me weep" (N. Debi, 2013, p. 179). This is not just an illiterate widow telling her story to a scribe, but an entire generation responding to the enquiring questions of a future generation. In *Saradasundari* too we have this latent voice of regret, and a disbelief that the mediator, positioned in an altogether altered social stage, would even be capable of understanding the enormity of their suffering.

What we get is only a product of the complex interplay between the voices which cancel one another out to a large extent. *Saradasundari* was already established as a righteous mother of a noble son, greatly renowned for his social accomplishments. The burden of upholding and justifying that persona is understandable. Nistarini Debi had no such privileged burden to bear, but her voice was nonetheless hushed by her innate hesitation and compliant instinct, both of which helped her survive despite the odds. In both, there is a desire for approval, not to stand out as an aberrant individual defying and challenging society, but as a social being, eager to court an identity socially sanctioned and appreciated. Even in their suffering, they do not focus on themselves as individuals but as part of a community, as common victims of social ostracization. No matter how honest the scribes may have been in representing the tales, they could never be the vacuum that they claimed (and perhaps even intended) to be. The narratives may be seen as conditioned documents of fragmentation, camouflaged in the façade of auto-diegesis, challenging and subverting every theory which concerns authorship and agency.

4. Conclusion

The autobiographical narratives examined in this paper reveal how women's self-representation in colonial Bengal was shaped by structures that limited not only literacy but also the

legitimacy of women's speech. Saradasundari Debi and Nistarini Debi speak from positions marked by dependency, mediation, and moral scrutiny, yet their narratives persist as records of lived experience that resist erasure. Their autobiographies do not offer unbroken narratives of selfhood; instead, they register constraint, negotiation, and endurance. Reading these texts as oral autobiographies foregrounds the ethical dimensions of life-writing under conditions of inequality. The presence of scribes and editors complicates authorship, but it does not invalidate the narratives. Rather, it draws attention to the collective and relational conditions under which women's voices entered the archive. These narratives expose the limits of autobiographical models that privilege autonomy and coherence, reminding us that historical subjects often spoke under surveillance and within narrow frameworks of acceptability.

By attending to these mediated forms of self-expression, the paper argues for a broader understanding of autobiography that accommodates silence, interruption, and dependence as meaningful narrative features. Such an approach not only recovers marginal voices but also challenges the assumptions through which literary history has judged credibility, agency, and selfhood. In this sense, these oral autobiographies stand as important documents of both personal memory and social structure, demanding to be read on their own terms rather than against inherited generic norms.

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