

Fiction as Resistance: Perspectives from Colonial and Contemporary Bengal

Aparna Bandyopadhyay

The proposed paper will focus on fictional literature penned by women in colonial and contemporary Bengal and see such fiction as resistance to patriarchy. It will examine the practice and practicalities of writing in a milieu that was and to a great extent still is inhospitable to women's intellectual development and creativity, and also reveal the diverse strategies adopted by women to subvert patriarchal attempts to constrict their creativity and control their lives and leisure. Writing fiction moreover, appears to serve for women the purpose of a safety valve for the release of the pent-up frustrations, agonies and unfulfilled cravings. Though their fiction they have sought to resolve their inner dilemmas and the questions that plague them. Finally, women novelists often tend to write their own lives into their fiction, merging their own selves with those of their women protagonists, their protagonists becoming their alter ego. Their fiction then becomes the vehicle through which they protest the oppression that they had been subjected to in their personal lives and also tell the world how they either chose the path of compromise and subservience or overcame odds, broke shackles, and eventually assumed control of their own lives. The paper will especially focus on Ashalata Singha's Jeevan Dhara, Maitreyee Devi's Na Hanyate, Mandakranta Sen's Jhanptaal, Tilottoma Majumdar's Ektara, and Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay's Sankhini and will see how these novelists sought to pen a bildungsroman of the woman writer whose creativity was dialectically linked to a turbulent and oppressive marital life, recording the eventual surrender to or triumph over patriarchal mores.

For women writers in colonial Bengal, penning fiction was an exercise that challenged patriarchal norms. They had to negotiate pervasive indifference and even hostility by adopting strategies of secrecy, anonymity and conformity.

The first section examines the practice and practicalities of writing in a milieu that was inhospitable to women's intellectual development and creativity. It throws light on the diverse modalities adopted by women to subvert patriarchal attempts to constrict their creativity and control their lives.

The second section delineates how women novelists in colonial Bengal often tended to write their own lives into their fiction, merging their own selves with those of their women protagonists, their protagonists becoming their alter ego. It especially focuses on two women writers, Ashalata Singha and Maitreyee Devi, and a few of their works. Writing fiction appears to serve for these women the purpose of a safety valve for the release of their own pent-up frustrations, agonies and unfulfilled cravings, a vehicle through which sought to resolve their inner dilemmas and contradictions.

The third section show that how even in contemporary times, fiction is a medium through which Bengali women writers protest the oppression that they had been subjected to in their own personal lives and also tell the world how they overcame odds and eventually assumed control of their lives. This section will focus on Mandakranta Sen's *Jhanptaal*,¹ Tilottoma Majumdar's *Ektara*,² and Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay's *Sankhini*³ and will see how these novelists sought to pen their own bildungsroman, with their creativity and other subsequent achievements dialectically linked to a turbulent and oppressive early life, foregrounding their eventual triumph over the heaviest of odds.

I

Women Attempting the Pen in Colonial Bengal: Strategies of Secrecy, Anonymity and Conformity

The literary imagination of Bengali women in the nineteenth century was an unintended by-product of male initiatives to spread education among them. When men decided to educate women, they did so to make their women better wives, better mothers and better homemakers. Education, they made it clear, was not meant to equip them for the public domain. A woman's economic self-reliance was considered an outrageous proposition. The prospect of women writing novels and plays did not figure in the scheme of things of men who took care to specify the curriculum that women should be taught to enhance their conjugal, maternal, and domestic roles. Women were expected to strictly adhere to the specified curriculum and only read the books prescribed. Even a leisurely indulgence in reading novels and plays was tabooed and condemned for the detrimental impact they allegedly had on women's minds and morals.

Fortunately, the reformist patriarchy of colonial Bengal could not successfully enfeeble women's intellectual and creative faculties. Women read novels and plays, at times, clandestinely in the privacy of their bedrooms, and even organized collective reading sessions in the *andarmahal* (the inner domain of the household) in the absence of their male guardians. Women did not stop at reading novels and plays. They dared to express their creative imagination by writing novels and also trying their hand in other genres like plays, short stories and poetry. Thus by their acts of reading and writing, women silently subverted the reformist agenda.

An uneasy lack of confidence and a mood of secretiveness, however, marked the earliest forays of Bengali women into the literary field. The aura of hostility all around coupled with an internalized sense of the impropriety of their own creative activity contributed to create, to borrow a phrase from Gilbert and Gubar, an 'anxiety of authorship'.⁴ An obsessive fear – the fear of criticism, condemnation and ridicule – haunted a woman writer's incipient literary initiatives, as Jyotirmoyee Devi observes.⁵ Most women lacked the courage to engage in their literary activities openly, and a chance discovery by unsympathetic husbands and relatives often ended in a premature abortion of their literary aspirations. The few who could make it were not necessarily the more fortunate ones in terms of familial attitudes. Again, a rare attitude of encouragement and cooperation from husbands and other family members did not necessarily dispel the shyness, hesitation, an overriding lack of confidence and the secretiveness of the literary women.

Swarnakumari Devi, (1855-1932), the avantgarde woman novelist of Bengal,⁶ was the fourth daughter of MaharshiDevendranath Tagore, a champion of the AdiBrahmoSamaj. Though she did not receive any formal education, she received regular instruction at home along with other members of her family. Her literary predilections, which became obvious at a very early age, matured easily in a family ambience in which almost everybody was engaged in some sort of creative activity or other. Her marriage at the age of thirteen to JanakinathGhosal, then a deputy magistrate, did in no way hamper her literary activities. By the time she was twenty-two years old, she had begun work on her maiden novel, *Dipnirvan*. This novel, published anonymously in 1876, hit the literary shelves of Bengal amid critics agog with speculation about the author's identity. Even her brothers had no idea that she had written this novel. Satyendranath Tagore, then in England, was deeply impressed by this book, but little did he imagine that it was written by his own sister, Swarnakumari. He speculated that it was written by his younger brother, Jyotirindranath Tagore.⁷ Eventually gaining the confidence to expose her own identity, Swarnakumari penned one novel after another, and later, as editor of *Bharati*,⁸ she encouraged and inspired many other women to express their literary imagination in print. Ironically enough, Swarnakumari's celebrated younger brother, Rabindranath Tagore, never thought highly of the merit of her works and had often gone public with his disparaging and even insinuating remarks on Swarnakumari's literary abilities.⁹

Anurupa Devi (1882-1958), the author of novels like *Mantashakti*,¹⁰ *Ma*,¹¹ *GariberMeye*,¹² *Mahanisha*¹³ and others, all bestsellers in their own time, would not reveal her initial literary endeavours to anyone except her elder sister, Surupa Devi (1879-1922), who was a novelist herself, writing with the pseudonym, Indira Devi.¹⁴ Anurupa's husband, a highly accomplished and well-placed man, was not known to be hostile to his wife's literary pursuits, yet when he insisted on being shown one of Anurupa's ongoing novels, the latter threw the manuscript into the river Ganges flowing beside their house at Chinsura, an act she was to repent afterwards. Later, when she began publishing her works, she preferred to write with the pseudonym, Anupama Devi. Interestingly, Swarnakumari Devi, then the editor of *Bharati*, persuaded her to discard her pseudonym and expose her true identity. Writing was not a sin, Swarnakumari tried to convince Anurupa Devi, in one of her letters¹⁵ and encouraged the latter to send her manuscripts to *Bharati*.¹⁶

Nirupama Devi (1883-1951), a child widow, whose *Annapurnar Mandir*,¹⁷ *Didi*,¹⁸ *Shyamali*,¹⁹ and other novels earned tremendous popularity among contemporary readers, was equally hesitant and secretive about her literary pursuits. Her brother, Bibhutibhusan Bhatta, was also a literary aspirant, and the famous novelist, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, was a close friend of his. Saratchandra, a regular visitor to the Bhatta house at Bhagalpur, where Nirupama spent her immediate post-widowhood years, would shower praises on whatever this *pardahnasin* (veiled, confined within the inner domain of the household) child widow, cast into a life of ascetic austerity, wrote. Nirupama's initial publications were in a hand-written magazine brought out by her brother, Bibhutibhusan, and his circle of friends, but she chose not to write with her own name. Initially publishing as Srimati Devi, she later adopted the pseudonym Anupama Devi, and even won the Kuntalin award consecutively in 1904 and 1905 with that pseudonym. Interestingly, Nirupama's

'*gangajaloi*',²⁰ Anurupa Devi, who was also a resident of Bhagalpur at that point of time, also used the pseudonym 'Anupama' in her earlier literary ventures.²¹ A deep bond of friendship grew between Anurupa and Nirupama, a bond that was based on mutual encouragement and inspiration, and was to last till their death. It was Anurupa Devi who sent Swarnakumari Devi the manuscript of Nirupama's first novel, *AnnapurnarMandir*.²² The editor of *Bharati* gladly accepted it and published it in a serialized form. This novel made Nirupama famous overnight.

Shailabala Ghosejaya (1894-1974) was already married when she began writing. She had to write secretly in between her endless domestic chores because her marital relatives were not too well disposed to her literary preoccupations. It was her husband, then a medical student, who took her manuscript to *Prabasi*,²³ another leading periodical of the time, and her maiden novel, *ShekhAndu*²⁴ was happily welcomed by the editor of *Prabasi*, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, '*Prabasi* is my greatest guru', Shailabala wrote to Mahashweta Devi in 1972.²⁵ By that time she had already penned more than thirty novels but her life had not been easy. Her husband became mentally ill hardly three years after their marriage, and Shailabala wrote to earn her living and take care of her ailing husband.²⁶

Ashalata Singha's (1911-1983) literary career began literally with a 'bang', her debut novel, *Amitar Prem*,²⁷ written at the age of sixteen, reasonably appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore.²⁸ This was followed by several other novels of remarkable merit. But unfortunately, she wrote little of significance after the age of twenty-six. While her own parents had always been very encouraging and had allowed her to interact with other budding intellectuals in her hometown, Bhagalpur, her marital home was relentlessly opposed to her literary pursuits. She had to write secretly, behind closed doors, but eventually she lost the battle.²⁹

Ashapura Devi (1909-1995) wrote with her own name but nobody knew who Ashapura Devi actually was for a long time, because she remained confined within the *andarmahal* till the age of thirty-eight. She never submitted her manuscripts herself to the editor or the publisher. Except on two occasions when she had sent them by post, they would be carried to the editor/publisher's office by her husband or her brother-in-law. Her readers and male counterparts would suspect it was a man writing with a female pseudonym as was the trend in those days. Later, when Ashapura decided to venture outside the *andarmahal* and attend literary events, her male peers such as Premenda Mitra, Sajanikanta Das et al would frankly confess that they had all along firmly believed that the hand that wrote her novels was a man's hand, strong as it was.³⁰

Paradoxically, a book authored by a woman was apparently considered immensely saleable by the publishing industry so much so that many men opted for female pseudonyms.³¹ It is also interesting to note that while British novelists of the Victorian era such as Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, George Eliot and others adopted male pseudonyms,³² so that they might be regarded as professional writers rather than 'light-weight literary ladies',³³ their Bengali counterparts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adopted female names other than their own to mask their identities. In both cases, the attempt to conceal their true identities was a strategy born of fear

and an anxiety of authorship – the anxiety that invariably entailed their engagement in the subversive act of writing and therefore trespassing into the male domain.

The woman writer's act of subversion could only be compensated by a perfect and flawless domestic role. In order to legitimize her rebellious endeavour, the literary woman adopted the strategy of conformity – she conformed in all other ways to patriarchal models of femininity and played the perfect wife, the perfect mother and the perfect manager of the household. Ashapura Devi served her family all day, and performed every piece of ritual to please her in-laws. She found time to write only in the dead of night.³⁴

Leela Majumdar (1908-2007) writes in her autobiography, *Pakdandi*:

Writing much at a time was not possible. Women like me remain perpetually submerged in all kinds of domestic responsibilities. My conscience would start hurting if I neglected those, and people at home would be displeased. It is difficult for a woman to engage in creative pursuits unless she is less encumbered. The creative potential of many a woman has thus suffered a miscarriage. Women who have worshipped goddess Saraswati in face of criticism are rare...³⁵

Thus the early generation of Bengali women writers attempted the pen in face of relentless hostility and pervasive attitudes of non-cooperation, and had to adopt the strategies of secrecy, anonymity and conformity among others in order to fulfil their literary aspirations. In this way, they sought to resist patriarchal attempts to throttle their creativity and thwart their emergence as individuals who could think, feel and write as strongly as men could.

II

Women Writing theirSelves in Fiction in Colonial Bengal

The literary oeuvre of women writers in colonial Bengal encompassed romance set in the historical or contemporary context, and the complexities of conjugal and familial relationships. However, I found that in case of many of these women novelists, writing a novel was a self-revelatory exercise. Conspicuously silent about their inner, intimate lives and relationships in their autobiographies, their fiction nevertheless tended to manifest recognizably autobiographical elements. I delved into the personal lives of these novelists. I found that many of them apparently conformed to patriarchal norms in their everyday lives, but beneath the veneer of conformity, they were torn by dilemmas, and the fiction penned by them bore the imprints of their inner turmoil. Through their fiction, they sought answers to the questions that plagued them. Writing fiction, to them, was evidently a release of their pent-up agonies, a quest for the resolution of their dilemmas and inner conflict. It was also a means of fulfilling desires and aspirations unrealizable in life. Fiction, to these women writers, was a safety valve for releasing the angst of conformity and the anxiety of non-conformity. This was particularly true of AshalataSingha's fiction.

Ashalata Singha was in love with Hemendralal Ray but marriage was denied by their respective families on account of caste differences. Eventually subjected to an arranged marriage, Ashalata suffered a deeply turbulent marital life. She remained in touch with her lover, a fact that her husband found out. Humiliated and oppressed in many ways, she tried to break away and even

made several failed attempts at suicide. There was no escape for her, however, and she had to eventually settle down with her husband and in-laws.³⁶ Making her debut in the literary arena at the age of sixteen with *AmitarPrem*[Amita's Romance],³⁷ a romance that created quite a stir in contemporary literary circles, she persisted in her literary pursuits for some years in face of tremendous hostility from her marital family. She stopped writing fiction at the age of twenty-six, and in her later life she became an ascetic, assuming the title of Ashapuri.

Romance triumphing over obstacles and finally culminating in a happy marriage was a major trope of several novels penned by this unhappy author. These obstacles might be external - familial resistance as in *Swayambara* [A Woman who Chooses her own Bridegroom],³⁸ or an inner psychological impasse, as in *Amitar Prem*. Ultimately, however, love soared over all hurdles, a triumph her own life had failed to achieve. In *AmitarPrem*, notwithstanding the happy ending, a stark contrast to her own failed romance, the autobiographical element was fairly pronounced. Amita was an exceptionally erudite, talented and precocious young woman like Ashalata herself, and this romance was probably modelled on her own courtship with Hemendralal.

Esha of *Jivan Dhara* [The Flow of Life]³⁹ had been averse to the idea of romance and courtship before marriage, and had spurned Debesh, who was in love with her. Enamoured of the ideology of *sativa*, of a wife's unquestioning surrender and loyalty to her husband, she entered an arranged marriage with a man hailing from a rural aristocratic family. After marriage, however, her husband's grossness and insensitivity and the oppressive atmosphere in her marital household so shocked Esha that she found it impossible to live up to her self-imposed commitment to the ideals of *satitva* and *patibratya*. When she could take it no longer, she returned to her parents, only to be reminded by her father and other relatives that she could not retrace her steps once she had tied the knot. The marriage bond was indissoluble and she had no other option at that juncture but to go back to her husband. It was a woman's duty, she was taught, to efface her selfhood and surrender herself unquestioningly to her husband and her marital family. Esha did so, but her earlier exuberance and naive expectations had been replaced by a stoical acceptance of existing circumstances. She realized, rather painfully, that she had actually sought love and understanding even though she had not admitted it, and her quest would remain unfulfilled in this life.⁴⁰

Esha, evidently, was the author's fictional counterpart. The only difference was that whereas Ashalata had been denied the fulfilment of her love, Esha had herself spurned love. Both, however, in the end had to come to terms with a marriage that was devoid of love, trust and understanding.

While this author's art evidently imitated her own personal life, the blurring of the distinction between the fictional protagonist and her creator was even more pronounced in Maitreyee Devi's (1914-1990) *Na Hanyate* [It Does not Die: A Romance].⁴¹ Penned in 1974, this novel (Maitreyee Devi herself describes it as a 'novel' in the preface to the first edition of the book) is set in the backdrop of the 1930s. The names are slightly different but not entirely so - Maitreyee renamed herself Amrita, and Mircea, the man Maitreyee was in love with, had his surname changed from Eliade to Euclid. Amrita fell in love with Mircea, a young Romanian scholar who had come to study with her father, a celebrated philosopher. The intimacy of the lovers, which extended to kisses, was

discovered by Amrita's sister, Savitri, who disclosed it to their parents. Mircea was instantly expelled and made to promise that he would never meet Amrita again. A devastated Amrita came to face to face with her father's hypocrisy and double standards. The latter had seemed to be very fond of Mircea but would not countenance his daughter's marriage to the latter, a foreigner that he was. Narendranath was the archetypal patriarch who liked to hold the minds of his wife and daughters under firm leash and control their lives while he himself indulged in an extra-marital relationship. Amrita suffered terribly within and even contemplated ending her life. She eventually entered an arranged marriage with a man who demanded very little attention, and Amrita continued to hanker for Mircea within. She met Mircea much later in her life, years after Mircea wrote *La Nuit Bengali*, [Bengali Nights,]⁴² a sexually overloaded fictional account of their aborted courtship. While Maitreyee Devi herself admitted that she needed to write *Na Hanyate* to counter the alleged carnality of Mircea's account, this fictionalized autobiography could be re-read as a poignant representation of the vicissitudes of a woman's journey along a life that was not in her control. Here is an author revealing the inner recesses of her own mind through the voice of her fictional protagonist and articulating her anguish and trauma, denied the consummation of her love by a moral regime that did not permit a woman's marriage of one's choice, more so if it breached the cultural/racial divide. The personal and the fictional intermeshed in an extraordinary manner, and this invests this novel with a significance beyond the purely literary. The novel is a record of the author's voice of protest raised against male double standards and patriarchal efforts to enfeeble a woman's emotions and sexuality.

III

The Bildungsroman of the Woman Writer: A Survey of a Few Novels by Contemporary Bengali Women Writers

The trend of women penning autobiographical fiction persists in the present day in Bengali literature. The personal pervades much of the novels by Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015), particularly her earlier ones like *KacherDeoyal* [A Wall of Glass]⁴³ and *KachherManush* [A Near One].⁴⁴ TilottamaMajumdar (1966 -) disclosed her own deeply troubled first marriage in her novel, *Ektara*, [A Musical Instrument used by Bauls],⁴⁵ MandakrantaSen (1972-)] did the same in *Jhaanptaal*. [A Famous *tala* of Hindustani Music]⁴⁶ SangeetaBandyopadhyay's (1974 -) debut novel, *Sankhini* [A Category of Woman in the Hindu Shastras]⁴⁷ is again a mirror of her own tempestuous marital life.

The biographical note on the back cover of *Ektara* says that TilottamaMajumdar, born in north Bengal, received her early education from a school in Kalchini tea estate, north Bengal. At the graduation level, she came to Calcutta and enrolled in Scottish Church College. The note further states that everyone in her family is engaged in literary pursuits, and her primary source of inspiration has been her elder brother. Then it proceeds to delineate her literary oeuvre and the awards and prizes she has won. The biographical note does not mention her marital status. While writing this paper, I had interviewed BaisakhiChakravarty,⁴⁸ a celebrated poet's wife and a poet herself, who is also a resident of Baranagore, north Calcutta, and knows Tilottama for years. Ms

Chakravarty revealed that even before Tilottama completed her graduation, she entered into a hasty and impulsive marriage with a man belonging to the reputed Majumdar family of Baranagore, that after several years of a turbulent conjugal life, Tilottama moved out and eventually succeeded in carving out a niche for herself in the Bengali literary arena. She has married again, and is evidently happy in her new relationship. Interestingly, though officially she still bears the surname of her first husband, her email id bears the surname of her second husband.

In Tilottama's *Ektara*, the principal protagonist is Debarati who recounts her childhood, her growing up at a tea estate in north Bengal, her years as an undergraduate student in Scottish Church College, her hasty marriage to her sister's brother-in-law, a man hailing from an influential family in Baranagore. She proceeds to narrate in the first person her traumatic marital life, the oppression of her in-laws, describes how she gradually comes to know the man her husband actually is - a lecherous and good-for-nothing person who had bluffed her regarding his credentials. Debarati decides to move out but prefers to wait till she is equipped to live independently. On the day of her departure, she meticulously completes all her domestic duties before she leaves. She shifts to a hostel, and her subsequent struggles to establish herself as a novelist are eventually rewarded. Her trials and tribulations come to an end, and she acquires fame and recognition as a novelist.

The bio-note provided on the back cover of Mandakranta Sen's *Jhaanptaal* says that her mother has been the greatest influence in Mandakranta's life. She was a medical student at Nilratan Sircar Medical College, but in the midst of her final exams she quit. Leaving her dream of becoming a doctor unfulfilled, she began to focus on her writings. Primarily a poet, *Jhaanptaal* is her debut novel. The note further says that she is married, and her husband, employed in the Special Branch of Calcutta Police, is also a writer. The note ends by saying that Mandakranta believes in God and in love. Shwetlana Dasgupta,⁴⁹ an elocutionist close to Mandakranta, whom I interviewed for knowing more about the latter's personal life, informed me that Mandakranta's educational career had been abruptly terminated by a hasty and impulsive love marriage. Mandakranta soon realized that she had made a mistake. A few years later, Mandakranta had no other option but to walk out of her marriage. After years of struggle, she succeeded in establishing herself as a poet and eventually married her present husband. Mandakranta Sen's *Jhaanptaal* is the story of Tithi, a college teacher, who walks down memory lane to relive her childhood, her adolescence and the trauma of her brief marital life. Tithi was a bright student of Geography Honours. She fell in love with her friend's brother, Partha, an aspiring film director, and soon eloped with him, marrying him against the wishes of her parents. Tithi tried to adjust and accommodate with her in-laws, banking on her husband, Partha as her pillar of support. Partha, however, turned out to be as insensitive as her parents. He, moreover, nursed big dreams but lacked the enterprise to fulfil them. Tithi realized that she must complete her education and be economically self-reliant. She decided to terminate her pregnancy because the priority before her was to complete her education. Meanwhile, it was becoming more and more difficult each day for Tithi to cope with Partha's ego and insensitivity. She decided to go back to her parents. Her parents, especially her mother, stood by her steadfast in her struggle to regain control of her life. She passed

one examination after another with flying colours and eventually got a teaching job in a college.

The bio-note provided in Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay's *Sankhini* says that she was born in Durgapur, and she subsequently moved to Calcutta to attend Bagbazar Multipurpose School and later Gokhale College. It further informs the reader that *Sankhini* is her first novel which she wrote in Santiniketan. It had taken her a year to write this novel. Baisakhi Chakravarty, whom I had interviewed for the purpose of this paper, knows Sangeeta fairly well. She divulged that Sangeeta lost both her parents early in life, and was brought up by her maternal uncles in Tala, Kolkata. While a student of Gokhale Memorial College, she married a man who turned out to be a fraud, a cruel and insensitive person, and her parent-in-laws were no better. Sangeeta had a child but eventually she could not bear it any longer. She left her child with her in-laws and moved to Santiniketan to pen her first novel.

Sankhini is the story of Ratri and her daughter, Tari. Ratri, a graduate good-looking girl from a lower middle-class family in north Calcutta, had an arranged marriage with Ronodeb, an engineer from a wealthy and aristocratic family background. Though initially rejecting Ronodeb's sexual overtures, Ratri soon fell in love with her husband. Her conjugal bliss, however, was shattered when she came to know about her husband's past affair with a widow named Ketaki. Feelings of insecurity and inferiority, coupled with her inability to bear a child, turned her paranoid. Ratri returned to her parents in a devastated mental state that was aggravated by physical illness. After staying separately for some time, Ratri returned to Durgapur to reclaim her position as wife. In a passionate and aggressive sexual encounter with her husband, she became pregnant. Tari, her daughter, brought joy to her parents but could not repair their damaged conjugality. Ratri died when Tari was nine. Ronodeb married six months later. Three years later, Ronodeb died of heart attack. Tari went to stay with her elder uncle, Baromamu, in Tala, Kolkata. Baromamu was otherwise caring and affectionate but he did not hesitate to beat her blue on the slightest pretext. Tari fell in love with a distant cousin and her feelings were reciprocated. When her uncle suspected that she was having an affair, he punished her so brutally that Tari made an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide by piercing her veins. Bruised and bleeding she left her uncle's house and moved to her lover Rupu's house. Rupu's parents were ready to welcome her as their daughter-in-law, but to stop wagging tongues they put her up in a hostel. Tari, it seemed, was perpetually adrift, moving from one address to another, with no place to call her own home. Her education suffered as she could not concentrate in her studies. Meanwhile Rupu seemed to have taken her for granted and began to spend less and less time with her. Tari could bear it no longer and impulsively married Sankha, a doctor, whom she had met only a few days back. Sankha, Tari eventually found out, was a much married man. Tari stayed on because she was tired of drifting from one place to another. However, when Sankha moved out to live in with Madhubani, a colleague of his, Tari left her son with her in-laws and moved out. Her life was in a complete shambles but she was determined to turn around. At Santiniketan, she began writing her first novel which was based on her own life. The autobiographical elements in *Sankhini* need no further elaboration.

Evidently, these authors have tried to tell the world how they became themselves, how deception in love, trauma in marriage and marital domesticity were intrinsic to the evolution of their creative

psyche and self assertion. Writing these novels has been their way of protesting the cruelty, injustice and betrayal they have been subjected to in their early lives, their chosen way of proving to the world that they are indomitable, they could not be crushed to dust, that they had the strength and resilience to rise again and again from dust.

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise (Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*)

Epilogue

Fiction, to Bengali women writers, was thus a site of contestation of patriarchy in colonial times, and continues to be so in the present day. The very praxis of writing fiction in the colonial milieu involved breaking taboos, negotiating hostile mindsets and the strategic manoeuvres of secrecy, anonymity and conformity. Moreover, much of the fiction written by Bengali women in the colonial period represented an overlap between the fictional and the autobiographical, laying bare those intimate areas of a woman's existence which were consciously eschewed in autobiographies. Writing served as a vehicle for the cathartic release of agonies and frustrations, and resolution of inner dilemmas and conflict. Fiction penned by Bengali women in contemporary times similarly resonates with personal, autobiographical elements, narrating the life-story of a woman who has successfully triumphed over betrayal and deception in love and a grossly oppressive conjugality to fulfil her cherished dreams. The woman writer's novel then becomes a vehicle through which she protests and reveals her triumph over injustice and oppression that she has been subjected to in her own life. Writing a novel thus acts as an exercise in resistance to patriarchy.

Personal narratives and life stories are extremely important in feminist scholarship. The members of the Personal Narratives Group in *Interpreting Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, writes that 'The recovery and interpretation of women's lives have been the central concerns of feminist scholarship'. Focusing on women's personal narratives as 'essential primary documents for feminist research', they state that these narratives can take many forms, including biography, autobiography, life history – a life story told to a second person who records it, as well as diaries, journals and letters.⁵⁰ To this palette of life stories, I take this opportunity to add the self-revelatory fiction that Bengali women have penned since colonial times. A register of both victimization and agency, of enforced self-effacement and self-assertion, the denial of identity and the recuperation of it, of conformity and resistance, the novels by these women authors are immensely significant to feminist scholarship.

Notes and References :

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4. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1984 (2nd edition). See Chapter Two: 'The Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship'.
5. Jyotirmoyee Devi, 'Amar LekharGorar Katha' [The Initial Phase of My Writing], *ChirantanNariJigyasa*[Women's Eternal Queries], *Jyotirmoyee Devi Rachanabali*[Collected Works of Jyotirmoyee Devi] vol 4, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1994.
6. There are several alternative claims to the position of the first Bengali woman novelist: Hemangini Devi who wrote *Manoramain* 1865 but published it in 1874, Nabinkali Devi, author of *Kaminikalanka*, 1870, Shibsundari Devi who penned *Tarabati* in 1863 or 1873, Hindukulakamini, evidently a pseudonym, who wrote *Manottamain* 1868. For the last claim, see AdrishBiswas and Mou Bhattacharya eds., *Manottama*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2011. It was Swarnakumari Devi, however, who can rightly be considered the avantgarde woman novelist. Her huge literary corpus, her versatility, and also the unprecedented popularity of her works rightly make her worthy of being hailed as the pioneer in the field of fiction authored by Bengali women.
7. MeenaChattopadhyay, *Swarnakumari Devi*, Anubhab, Kolkata, 2000, p. 44.
8. The first edition of this periodical was published in 1877. Its foremost editor was Jyotirindranath Tagore. After Jyotirindranath's wife, Kadambari's death, the Tagore family became so disoriented that it seemed that *Bharati* would die a premature death. In 1884, Swarnakumari decided to take over as editor of this periodical. She remained so till 1894, and then enjoyed another stint as editor from 1908 to 1914. Her daughters, Hironmoyee Devi and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, were joint editors of *Bharati* from 1895 to 1897.
9. SudakshinaGhosh, *MeyederUpanyaseMeyeder Katha* [Accounts of Women in Women's Writings], Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2008, pp. 12, 38-39.
10. Anurupa Devi, *Mantrashakti*[The Power of the Nuptial Hymns], GurudasChattopadhyay and Sons, Calcutta, 1915. Initially published serially in *Bharatvarsha* from *Ashad*(mid-June – mid-July) 1320 B.S. (1913) to *Aswin* (mid-September – mid-October) 1321 B.S. (1914).
11. Anurupa Devi, *Ma* [Mother], Mitra and GhoshPvt Ltd, Calcutta, 1982.
12. Anurupa Devi, *GariberMeye*[A Poor Man's Daughter], Bhudev Publishing House, 1926.
13. Anurupa Devi, *Mahanisha*[The Great Night], GurudasChattopadhyay and Sons, 1919. Initially published serially in *Bharatvarsha* from *Chaitra* (mid-March – mid-April) 1321 B.S. (1915) onwards.
14. Some of Indira (Surupa) Devi's novels are *Sparshamani* (1919), *Parajita* (1921), *Pratyabartan* (1922) etc.
15. Anurupa Devi, 'Bharati-Smriti' [Memories of Bharati] in AbhijitSen and Abhijit Bhattacharya eds., *Sekele Katha: ShatakerSuchonayMeyederSmritikatha*[An Account of Those Times: Women's Memoirs at the Dawn of the Century], NayaUdyog, Kolkata, 1997, pp. 178-187.
16. Anurupa Devi's maiden novel was *Tilakuthi*[Cottage on the Hillock], published serially in *Nabanur*, from *Baisakh* 1313 B.S. (1906). This novel was written with the pseudonym Anupama Devi. Her first novel in *Bharati*, published on Swarnakumari Devi's inspiration, was *Poshyaputra*[Adopted Son], published serially from *Baisakh* 1316 B.S. (1909) to *Baisakh* 1318 B.S. (1911). It was published as a book in 1319 B.S. (1912) by GurudasChattopadhyay and Sons.
17. Nirupama Devi, *AnnapurnarMandir*[Annapurna's Temple], Indian Publishing House, Calcutta, 1913. Initially published serially in *Bharati*from *Kartik*(mid-October – mid-November) to *Chaitra* 1318 B.S. (1911-1912).

18. Nirupama Devi, *Didi* [Elder Sister], Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons, Calcutta, 1915. Initially published in *Prabasi* from *Baisakh* 1319 B.S. (1912) to *Bhadra* (mid-August – mid-September) 1320 B.S. (1913).
19. Nirupama Devi, *Shyamali*, M. C. Sarkar and Sons, Calcutta, 1919. Published serially in *Prabasi* from *Kartik* 1325 B.S. (1918) to *Aswin* (mid-September – mid-October) 1326 B.S. (1919).
20. ‘*Soipatano*’ was a ritual traditionally practised by Bengali women to forge a mutual bond of friendship. The ‘*sois*’ or friends addressed each other by a common name. Thus both Anurupa Devi and Nirupama Devi addressed each other by the endearing word ‘*gangajal*’ which literally meant water of the river Ganges.
21. Chitrarekha Gupta, *Nirupama Devi: Jivane o Sahitye* [Nirupama Devi: In Life and Literature], Signet press, Kolkata, 2011, pp. 22-30.
22. Anurupa Devi, ‘Bharati Smriti’, pp. 185-186.
23. *Prabasi* was launched in 1901 by Ramananda Chattopadhyay and it continued to be published till 1964.
24. Shailabala Ghosejaya, *Shekh Andu*, Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons, Calcutta, 1917. Initially published serially in *Prabasi* from *Baisakh* (mid-April – mid-May) 1322 (1915) to *Falgun* (mid-February – mid-March) 1322 B.S. (1916).
25. See Abhijit Sen and Anindita Bhaduri, ‘Sankalan Prasange Jatkinchit’ [A Word or Two the Anthology] in Abhijit Sen and Anindita Bhaduri eds., *Shailabala Ghosejaya Galpa Sankalan* [Collected Short Stories of Shailabala Ghosejaya], Dey’s Publishing and School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 200, pp. 12-13.
26. Sourin Bhattacharya, ‘Bhumika’ [Introduction] in Abhijit Sen and Anindita Bhaduri eds., *Shailabala Ghosejaya Galpa Sankalan*, p. 6.
27. Ashalata Singha, *Amitar Prem* [Amita’s Romance], 1938, in *Ashalata Singha Rachanabali* [Collected Writings of Ashalata Singha], Bihar Bangla Academy, Patna, 1990.
28. Rabindranath Tagore’s letter to Ashalata Singha dated 1 May 1934, preserved in Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.
29. Tapobrata Ghosh, ‘Bhumika’, *Ashalata Singher Galpa Sankalan* vol 1, Dey’s Publishing and School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2006; Aruna Haldar, ‘Abataranika’ [Foreword], *Ashalata Singha Rachanabali*; Shampa Sinha, *Ashalata Singher Shrishtilok: Atmadarshaner Bichitra Shilparup* [The Creativity of Ashalata Singha: A Strange Vision of Self], Ashadeep, Kolkata, 2012. Also see Aparna Bandyopadhyay, ‘Smaran: Ashalata Singha’ [Remembering Ashalata Singha], *Annual Newsletter*, Women’s Studies Centre, Lady Brabourne College, 2011.
30. See Upasana Ghosh, *Ashapurna Devi*, Paschim Bangla Academy, 2012 (2nd edition), pp. 25-26.
31. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay adopted the pseudonym Anila Devi in several of his works; Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay won the Kuntalin award with the pseudonym Srimati Radhamoni Devi. Manoda Devi, the author of *Shikshita Patitar Atmcharit* [Autobiography of an Educated Prostitute] (1929) and Shailasuta Devi, author of *Parinaye Pragati* [Progress in Marriage] (undated, tentatively published in the 1930s) are suspected to have been men.
32. Mary Ann Evans took the pseudonym of George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte adopted the pseudonym Currer Bell, Emily Bronte wrote with the pseudonym Ellis Bell and Anne Bronte identified herself as Acton Bell.
33. Vineta Colby, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century*; New York University Press, New York, 1970, p. 48.
34. Sudakshina Ghosh, *Meyeder Upanyase Meyeder Katha*, pp. 11-12.
35. Leela Majumdar, *Pakdandi* [Winding Mountain Path], Ananda Publishers, 2008 (reprint), p. 295.

36. See TapobrataGhosh, 'Bhumika' [Introduction] to *AshalataSingherGalpaSankalan* [Collected Short Stories of AshalataSingha] vol 1, Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, JU, Kolkata, 2006.
37. AshalataSingha, *AmitarPrem*[Amita's Romance], 1934, in *AshalataSinghaRachanabali*[Collected Works of AshalataSingha], Bihar Bangla Academy, Patna, 1990.
38. AshalataSingha, *Swayambara*[A Woman who Chooses her Own Bridegroom], 1943, publisher not known.
39. AshalataSingha, *JivanDhara* [The Flow of Life], Calcutta, 1950, publisher not known.
40. See AparnaBandyopadhyay, 'AshalataSingherUpnyaseNariBhavna' [The Women's Question in AshalataSingha's Novels], *ItihasAnusandhan* 14, PaschimbangaItihasSamsad, 1999; AparnaBandyopadhyay, 'Samaj, Byaktijivan o Narisrijan: Nirupama Devi o AshalataSingha' [Society, Personal Life and Women's Creativity: Nirupama Devi and AshalataSingha], *ItihasAnusandhan* 29, PaschimbangaItihasSamsad, 2015; ShampaSinha, *AshalataSingherShrishtilok: AtmadarshanerBichitraShilparup*[Creativity of AshalataSingha: Diverse Artistic Forms of Self-Reflection], Ashadeep, Kolkata, 2012.
41. Maitreyi Devi, *Na Hanyate*[It Does not Die: A Romance],Prima Publications, Calcutta, 1990, first published 1974.
42. Mircea Eliade, *La Nuit Bengali* [Bengali Nights], 1933.
43. Suchitra Bhattacharya, *KacherDeoyal*[A Wall of Glass], Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1993.
44. Suchitra Bhattacharya, *KachherManush*[A Near One], Ananda Publishers, Calcutta.
45. TilottamaMajumdar, *Ektara*[A Musical Instrument used by Bauls], Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2006
46. MandakrantaSen, *Jhaanptaal*[A Famous *tala* of Hindustani Music], Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2000
47. SangeetaBandyopadhyay, *Sankhini*[A Category of Woman in the Hindu Shastras], Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2008.
48. Personal interview with MsBaisakhiChakravarty, 11.10.2016.Name changed on request.
49. Personal interview with MsSwetlanaDasgupta, 15.10.2016.Name changed on request.
50. Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989.

