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REDEFINING SILENCE AND SELF-REPRESENTATION: A DISQUISITION ON FEMALE RESISTANCE IN COLONIAL INDIA THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

Oly Roy

"How are we fallen! fallen by mistaken rules,
And Education's more than Nature's fools;
Debarred from all improvements of the mind,
And to be dull, expected and designed;
And if someone would soar above the rest,
With warmer fancy, and ambition pressed,
So strong the opposing faction still appears,
The hopes to thrive can ne'er outweigh the fears."
(Virginia Woolf, 1929)

The paper endeavours to construct a social and legal discourse through 'history from below' and theory of social representations. This work would primarily focus on an autobiography, '*Amar Jiban'* by Rashsundari Devi and a collection of Indian stories entitled, '*Love and Life behind the Purdah'* penned by Cornelia Sorabji. The exploits displayed through their works reflects courage, strength and a revolutionary spirit as their struggles were unique in their own way. *Amar Jiban* is the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman, "and very probably, the first full-scale autobiography in the Bengali language." Rashsundari Devi's work belonged to a time when it was considered a 'sin' for women to be literate. Rashsundari became a widow at fifty-nine and she finished the first version of her autobiography the next year, in 1868. She added a second part and a new version came out in the year 1897, when she was eighty eight.

The other work that the paper would refer to is of Cornelia Sorabji, the first female graduate from Bombay University; the first woman to study Law at the prestigious Oxford University and she was the first female advocate in India and was also the first woman to practice Law even in Britain. She emerged as a 'Woman of many accomplishments' during a time when her being a female acted as an obstruction at achieving her passion and dream, not only in India, but in England as well. Cornelia Sorabji advocated for various social reforms that were mainly centred on women, like education for girls, legal rights for women subject to seclusion (*purdahnashins*), abolition of child marriage, and voiced strongly for protection and support for widows.

The female voice in women's writings provides insights and perspectives which are of profound importance as far as issues related to gender are concerned. Their compelling narratives would

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be a formidable tool to understand and analyse the idea of identity, sexuality, marriage, family, social life and legal status during colonial India. The literary masterpieces would be used in the context of various social and legal reforms of the period that had an impact on women during the period. It would also explore their journey of 'transgression' that continues to provide an inspiration to women in contemporary times knowingly (in case of Cornelia Sorabji) or unknowingly (Rashsundari Devi).

Keywords: Female voice, Discourse, Colonial India, Representations, Silence.

Introduction: The Unheard Voices

The voices of the subaltern have often been silenced and ignored from the dominant historical narrative.

As Nannerl O. Keohane has discussed how silence is associated with traits like "modesty, purity, and woman's virtue". Even Aristotle stated, "A modest silence is a woman's crown." (Keohane 1981: 428) According to the Victorian discourse, "The true destiny of a woman is to wed a man she can love and esteem . . . and to lead noiselessly, under his protection, with all the wisdom, grace and heroism that is in her, the life presented in consequence. The power of such prescriptive silence is such that when women do speak, their speech sounds strange. It deviates from the norm of masculinity, in timbre and in pattern." (ibid)

Historically speaking, the private space has mostly belonged to women, unrecognised and thus, unpaid. The concept of space has been vital to women's struggles and movement. The 'personal is political' encapsulates the meaning and importance of female space, though its implications may vary. A literary work that portrays the real picture of power imbalance within gendered spaces is Virginia Woolf's work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Virginia Woolf's work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) enumerates the impact of gendered structures existing within the private and public domain. She asks, "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?" (Woolf 1929) While women's interaction has been frowned upon and termed as the vile 'gossip', men's interfaces are often labelled as productive ideas.

Virginia Woolf talks about the glorification of masculinity within the realm of power struggles and element of superiority amongst these patriarchs – "That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge." The feeling of superiority is instrumental in a patriarchal society, the lines, "How is he to go on giving judgement, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?" summarises it all. (Woolf 1929)

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This paper endeavours to construct a social and legal discourse through 'history from below'. This work would primarily focus on an autobiography, '*Amar Jiban'* by Rashsundari Devi and a collection of Indian stories titled, '*Love and Life behind the Purdah'* penned by Cornelia Sorabji. The exploits displayed through their works reflects courage, strength and a revolutionary spirit as their struggles were unique in their own way. *Amar Jiban* is the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman, "and very probably, the first full-scale autobiography in the Bengali language." (Sarkar 2013:1) Rashsundari Devi's work belonged to a time when it was considered a 'sin' for women to be literate. She became a widow at fifty-nine and she finished the first version of her autobiography the next year, in 1868. She added a second part and a new version came out in the year 1897, when she was eighty eight.

The other work that the paper would discuss about is of Cornelia Sorabji, the first female graduate from Bombay University; the first woman to study Law at the prestigious Oxford University and she was the first female advocate in India and was also the first woman to practice Law even in Britain. "The aim and ambition of Miss Sorabji's life has been to benefit and to serve her countrymen…" She emerged as a 'Woman of many accomplishments' during a time when her being a female acted as an obstruction at achieving her passion and dream, not only in India, but in England as well. It was in 1922 that she was called to the English bar and became the first woman to practice law in Britain. By 1924, India also had opened up the legal profession to women and, upon travelling back to Calcutta, she enrolled as a barrister at the High Court. Cornelia Sorabji advocated for various social reforms that were mainly centred on women, like education for girls, legal rights for women subject to seclusion (*purdahnashins*), abolition of child marriage, and voiced strongly for protection and support for widows.

The study of women's writings is symbolic. The female voice in women's writings provides insights and perspectives which are of profound importance as far as issues related to gender are concerned. Their compelling narratives would be a formidable tool to understand and analyse the idea of identity, sexuality, marriage, family, social life and legal status during colonial India. The literary masterpieces would be used in the context of various social and legal reforms of the period that had an impact on women during the period. It would also explore their journey of 'transgression' that continues to provide an inspiration to women in contemporary times knowingly (in case of Cornelia Sorabji) or unknowingly (Rashsundari Devi).

Time, Space and Context: Understanding the Socio-legal framework

"Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest." (Woolf 1929)

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Societal norms were structured in a manner that led to the imposition of restraints on women and thus had an impact on women's education and their access to receiving one. In pre- and early British India there was no organised provision for educating women, it was mostly accessible to males of the Brahmins, upper caste Hindus and to privileged non-Hindu minority groups. The number of educated women was small.

Modern education for women in India began in the early years of the nineteenth century and by 1880 universities started admitting them – Calcutta in 1877-78 and Bombay in 1883. Progress was exceptionally slow particularly until 1921. It was when education was handed over to Indian ministers in the provincial administration. Female literacy crawled from 0.2 per cent in 1881 to 1.8 per cent in 1921. Most of these enrolments were in primary schools. In 1921 out of a total of 12.24 lakh girls on rolls, only 26 thousand were enrolled in secondary schools and less than thousand in the colleges. The situation became a little better in following years particularly after Indian ministries assumed office in provinces after 1937. Social forces intertwined with legal reforms played an important role in the rising percentages. (Kamat 1976)

The nineteenth century has been termed as an 'age of women'. The question of women's rights became a central issue across the world, though the nature of the social origins varied. Social reforms in Bengal and Maharashtra began early in colonial India. Various reasons and perspectives have been attributed to the origins of such reforms. The importance of educating women was first discussed publicly by the *Atmiya Sabha* founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1815. (Kumar 2018: 7-8)

Certain economic policies like that of Permanent Settlement which aimed at creating land-owning class, similar to that of England also 'undermined the claims of widows. The story of married woman's claim to property was bleak – married woman's property rights began in mid-19th century and was successful only after around twenty years. In Bengal, to cater to the needs of the new gentry' class, the private realm also needed to be reformed. One of the origins of the need for women's education can be traced back to the re-quip of this class. Social reform in Bombay consisted of anti-caste movement by those considered as 'low'-caste and 'untouchable' groups and the high-caste movement for reform. Jyotirao Phule founded his first school for girls in Poona. By 1852, he opened three schools for girls, and one for those who were considered as 'untouchable'. (Kumar 2018: 15)

In Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar started his campaign to remove ban on widow remarriage. He submitted a petition to the Governor-General in 1855 for a law to be passed that would recognise widow remarriage. The Bill was passed in 1856, but very few marriages resulted from it. (Kumar 2018).

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At the same time, there was a cautionary note regarding 'Anglicisation' by prominent Indian leaders and reformers, while on the other hand Missionaries were of the view that British rule and English education played a pivotal role in spreading culture and reason amongst Indians, thus removing 'darkness of ignorance'. (ibid.: 20)

One of the reasons behind improving women's condition was for the sake of their husband and children. Indian social reformers turned their attention to race and biological definitions – efforts were put towards proving that inferiority was not genetic, but was related to social practices, thus practices like *sati*, infant marriage, *purdah* were attacked. (ibid.:24) There were also attempts to revise the age of consent. An Act was passed in 1860 that fixed the age of consent at ten. Women doctors in Calcutta supported the reform argument for raising the age of consent and sixteen hundred 'Hindu ladies' sent a petition asking for legislative reform to Queen Victoria in 1890. (ibid.:25) A reference can be made to a case wherein a man named Dadaji Bhikaji in 1884 filed a suit for restitution of conjugal rights as his wife Rakhmabai, married in childhood, who was subsequently educated refused to live with him when she grew up. Around 1892 in South India there were campaigns against polygamy, child marriage, bride price and the 'prostitution' of temple dancers. The social reform movements of nineteenth century has been criticised for voicing concerns related to the upper caste Hindu women. (ibid.:27)

Even though by the late nineteenth century the impact of social reform movements were visible, personal revolts were few. There was an increase in the number of women in public spaces. But women who dared to overthrow patriarchal beliefs and practices were scorned. There were also attempts to reform the conjugal relationship – the goal was to make it an egalitarian one. Around 1890s there were public campaigns by women (for example groups of Brahmo women in Calcutta walked through the streets against *purdah*). It was during these years that women started to get involved in nationalist campaigns and organisations. (ibid.:32) By the end of nineteenth century, issues of rape and racism were also interlinked and it was soon used by nationalists as a weapon against British rule. (ibid.) It was an indigenous problem as well – the case of Phulmoni Debi an eleven year old child bride died in 1893 when her husband raped her. Women's organisation also played a pivotal role not only in the nationalist movement, but also empowering women. Swarnkumari Debi in 1886 started a women's organisation to train widows who would also become instrumental in the spread of women's education. She also started the annual women's craft fairs wherein handicrafts made by Indian women were sold. This also helped in promoting *Swadeshi* products. (ibid.:37) The 1905-8 *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal also highlights the chapter of women's participation in nationalist activities on a broader scale.

Thus, "the new agrarian, industrial and social relations engendered by British dominance undermined existing structures of patriarchy, resulting in violent and intensified expressions of 'patriarchal traditions' on the one hand, and, on the other, attempts to reform patriarchy which

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often amounted to reconstituting it in a Western mould (and, in this process, eroding some of the women's traditional rights). (Kumar 2018: 47)

Subsequently the place of Indian women in 'national life' was as mothers. It was reflected in Madam Cama's speech in 1910 and in Sarojini Naidu's speech in 1916. (ibid.: 50) In 1908, the Indian Factory Commission emphasised the need to restrict women's hours of work in order to protect to "some extent all women operatives who have household duties to perform and will thereby tend to promote the general health of the whole body of workers." (ibid.:51)

The period from 1910-1920 witnessed attempts at setting up all-India women's organisations and from late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century local or regional organisations followed. They discussed on issues like – female education, the place of women in Modern India, childbirth, 'injurious' effects of child marriage etc. At the same time women were now beginning to create their own real life ideals – M.E Cousins referred to 'three women who occupied the place of power and honour'. They were Annie Besant, Sarojini Devi Naidu and Begum Ammam Bibi. (ibid.:54-57) The 1920-21 civil disobedience movement marked the time when nationalists began to organise women. The dialogue about equality began to develop amongst women in the late 1910s and 1920s.

The All India Women's Conference also voiced their support for the Sarda Bill. At their fourth conference the campaign for reforming women's inheritance laws was discussed and in the fourth, fifth and sixth conferences women's conditions of labour and the Maternity Benefit Act were discussed. (ibid.:68) Under the pressure built by Indian social reformers, the British government passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act, popularly known as the Sarda Act. The Act fixed the ages of 14 and 18 years as minimum marriageable ages of girls and boys, respectively. It was passed in September 1929 and came into force on 1 April 1930. While the reformers welcomed it, "expecting great returns in terms of increased educational opportunities to girls and improvement in their health", the conservative sections bitterly opposed it. (Basha 2023)The two main objectives of the Act were – (i) by declaring invalid the marriages of girls below 12 years of age, is to put a stop such girls becoming widows" and (ii) to prevent physical and moral deterioration of boys and girls.

Women continued to be instrumental at all levels in the nationalist struggle for freedom and by the 1940s, when independence was on the imminent, "the issue of women's emancipation was felt to have been resolved." (Kumar 2018)

Some scholars are of the view that reforms created by the British were meant for imposing Victorian worldview on Indian subjects and it was women from the upper strata of society who benefitted whereas some Dalit women were fighting unequal battles with British rule in India. Dalits were absent in the pages of the conventional mainstream historiography. (Sarvesh, Singh,

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Alam) But, clubbing all the women's voices indiscriminately left the Dalit women's voices buried beneath the mounds of hierarchical and patriarchal intersections of Indian society.

Dalits saw Jhalkaribai (Kori caste) and Udadevi (Pasi caste) as an inspiration. Another such voice was Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, who belonged to the caste from which *Devadasis* were drawn. She narrated her story in Kudi Arasu magazine in 1925. Ramamirthan Ammaiyar began her political career in the Indian National Congress but left it to join the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-1920s. She published a voluminous novel in Tamil in 1936 on *Devadasis* and also wrote the fictional series Damayanthi in Dravida Nadu in 1945. Another very prominent voice was that of Savitribai Phule.

The Dalit voices either went unnoticed or undocumented. Dalit women had to wage war and struggled through multiple layers of discrimination. Women's writings are powerful tool to express rage over the existing discriminatory practices and bringing about liberation through words. The works of Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Moon, Bama and Sivakami and Kaushalya Baisantri helps in political and social reawakening.

The contributions of tribal women to pre-independence tribal movements were frequently minimised and ignored. Tribal women faced numerous challenges and repression to pave their way. Notable contributions were made by Dashriben Chaudhari, Velu Nachiyar, Rani Gaidinliu, Rani Kamalapati, Rajmohini Devi, Rani Chennamma, Singi Dai, Rani Ropuiliani and Virangna Leepa.

It was argued in the pioneering anthology *Recasting Women* that reforms actually re-imprisoned modern women into new cages of male desires. Historiographical shifts vividly point to the layered relationship between gender, reforms and nationalism. Subaltern historians, particularly in their search for non-elite perspectives for understanding historical processes, have also left their mark on gender historiography of colonial India. They too point to the coercive power of modernity and argue that the central question regarding women in the nineteenth century was not what women wanted but rather how to modernise them, and this came with its own coercive package. Simultaneously, multi-ethnic and inter-racial families, which formed a constitutive part of Anglo-Indian colonial society in its formative areas, provide new dimensions to representations of gender and social hierarchies. (Gupta 2020)

Understanding social reforms and nationalism is the key to understanding the gender history and issues during the colonial India.

Literature helps in shaping and questioning social norms including that of gender roles and questions. It helps in understanding socio-cultural, political and economic condition of the period and the author's writing is a response to the prevailing conditions which in turn helps in comprehending and reconstructing history from below, free from the dominant gaze.

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This paper addresses literary pieces by women in a way that takes into account different spaces and geographical contexts. In feminist theories, narrative has epistemological and methodological value because it is through narrative that personal experience-source of knowledge-can is shared and theorized. (Sharkey 2004)

Memories Revisited: Autobiographies and the Idea of Truth

"Why was I born a woman?"

"Autobiographies…can be called the psychological source of history." It is said to record details of contemporary life that are too small and ordinary to have been found worth mention in any official record. (Jinimon 2007) Autobiographies by women help in addressing power dynamics.

Stories are powerful learning tools but they are also powerful censoring tools. Because narratives such as autobiographies are social practices in specific socio-historical and political contexts, we learn how to tell stories that others will listen to. (Sharkey 2004)

Amar Jiban is the first autobiography by a Bengali woman and the first full scale autobiography in Bengali language. The author, Rashsundari Debi is a housewife from an upper caste landed family. Her life has been "uneventful" and "unremarkable". Rashsundari was born around 1809 and when she was twelve she was married off to a 'prosperous' landlord. When she was fourteen, she looked after an entire household and gave birth to twelve children. It was at the age of twenty-five that she taught herself to read and later to write. She became a widow when she was fifty-nine and next year in 1868 she finished her first version of her autobiography. Rashsundari also added a second part and the new draft came out when she was eighty-eight, in 1897. It was her only literary creation.

She taught herself to read and write in a time when women belonging to orthodox Hindu families were kept illiterate and it was believed that educated women were destined to be widowed. Efforts by Christian missionaries and Indian reformers to educate women led to a backlash against this.

The question arises what led her to an act that was considered a transgression in her time. Rashsunadari mentions that it was her strong desire to read a particular sacred text. The book was *Chaitanya Bhagabat*.

Rashsundari was a landlord's daughter and a landlord's wife, but she did not have economic independence in any form. Her autobiography gives a detailed version of the domestic space of upper caste Hindus – the role of women in the form of daughters and wives and her life as a widow. Rashsundari was close to her mother and abide by her words. Right from her childhood

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she was taught by her mother to remember the deity, Dayamadhav while in crisis and this teaching stayed with her for long. She mentions that girls during her times were not educated "as they were these days" (most probably during the period she wrote her autobiography). They had a vernacular school in their own home and a *memsahib* taught there. She was eight back then. Rashsundari also mentions that it was fashionable to learn Persian those days and she learnt some of that. Her work also mentions the pain and torment that she had to go through after getting married at a tender age – "I have lost my mother's arms." This was just the beginning of her ordeal. (Devi: 175)

Her narration is of utmost importance as it provides a close peak into the emotional torment that child brides go through. She describes how she was surrounded by complete strangers and the discomfort she felt. Even though her marital household took good care of her, nothing was able to give her the same warmth that the love of her mother provided, all taken away by the societal codes and morals of the period. When she went to her mother's home, she asked, "Ma, why did you give me away to a stranger?" (Devi: 178)But gradually she became "tamed" and she was their "pet bird". When her mother-in-law was well and alive, it was she who looked after the household work. As the mother-in-law lost her sight, she was not able to do any work. It was Rashsundari who looked after her and all the household work was her responsibility. She had to tend to the household deity whose meals had to be "ritually cooked". There was always flow of guests who were to be fed separately. The meals of the family members were also on a grand scale. She had to cook for twenty-five to twenty-six people twice a day. All these duties fell on her shoulders and it was her Lord that she prayed to.

Leisure was not an option for women those days, if she had some time off, that time was supposed to be used to tend to the head of the household – "that meant they had to stand at his side meekly and humbly." (Devi: 182)

Rashsundari exposed the societal expectation from a bride – that how brides "had to be especially hard working and quiet. They had to work from behind a long veil and then they would get to be known as good wives. Our clothes used to be coarse, not like the fine cloth of today. I had to cover my face with that, my veil had to reach down to my chest, and, dressed in this way, I did all the work. I spoke to no one, I could hardly see anyone beyond my veil. My eyes were covered, like the eyes of the oil presser's bullock. I had to look down, all I could see were my own toes. This was how young married women were supposed to work. And I worked that way, too.

The veil, the *purdah* acted as a barrier not only from the male gaze, but her accessibility to the outer world and its imminent 'danger'. Her gaze was only meant for the domestic sphere and its male head. Her autonomy, her wants and desired were veiled.

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It was when she was fourteen that she desired to learn to read. In those days women were not educated as people would scorn at them and say, "Ah, it seems the *kali* age is, indeed, upon us! Now women will take over men's jobs…now the man is but a passive thing, the woman is the public figure. This is the age of a female monarch. What else do we have to put up with? The way things are going, soon gentlefolk will lose their caste. Perhaps these wretched females will get together and start educating themselves!" (Devi: 184)Even though these words expresses the fear and comprehension that patriarchy beheld if women had autonomy over her mind, body and life, but such words acted as a threat to women who would dare to transgress. Rashsundari Devi was also "terrified". She prayed to her lord to teach her to read as she would be using it to read religious manuscript. The question is, would it be considered as a transgression?

The author of *Amar Jiban* opined that it is a 'positive development' that women are being educated 'these' days. Rashsundari repeatedly mentions how women were "allowed" to be educated – it reflects a form of repentance. She had her first child when she was eighteen and her last child was born when she was forty-one. And these twenty-three years has been exhausting for her, both mentally and physically – "I never knew any rest, nor could I look after myself." (Devi: 186) She often missed her meals, even though she made sure that no one in the household would be empty stomach – a setting that still engulfs the Indian society. Her exhaustion has always been glorified, only to make her do more. There were eight maidservants, but none were meant for household chores. She described a day or two of her life – "I would get up in the morning while the children still slept and I would start working. I had to cook the rice before they got up. After I had fed them, I would finish off other chores and then prepare for the ritual meal that was daily offered up to the domestic deity. Then I would prepare and cook lunch for the entire household. It was quite a lot of food! It would be about ten to twelve seers of rice for the evening meal alone. In the meantime, *karta* must have his rice as soon as he had finished his bath. He did not relish anything else for breakfast. So, his rice had to be cooked early and separately. Then I cooked for everyone else. I would be cooking lunch until three or four in the afternoon." (Devi: 186)

As a woman's labour have remained unrecognised and thus, unpaid, after an exhaustive day, whenever the children would cry at night, her husband would express his disappointment over it. While being apprehensive of getting sick, she was anxious as to who would then look after her children. For her, her God was the only solace.

Rashsundari cared endlessly for her marital house, but she repents for not being able to serve and nurse and care for her mother. She felt that she was in a prison ever since she came to her in-law house – "I could never be allowed to visit her because the household chores here would suffer." (Devi: 190) Even if she would visit her mother occasionally, it "was like a prisoner let out on parole, I had to be back within a couple of days." (Devi: 190) Her repentance brings out the pain that women experienced due to the societal codes – "Had I been her son, I would fly like a bird

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to reach her side when I got news of her end. What was I to do, I was behind bars, I was shut in a cage." (Devi: 190) No one tended to her emotions and wants, her emotions were only meant to be locked up to serve the patriarchal needs of the society. She seemed to miss her childhood, she felt as if it was erased. In contemporary times, women experience the same exhaustion, burden and trauma.

To learn to read religious manuscripts and later to write was to find some peace and solace and heal herself. She was not only aware of changes in her time, but also of religious scriptures like the *Agams*, the *Nigams*, the *Vedas* and the *Koran*. She had to put in lot of efforts, both internally and externally to learn to read and write. She was apprehensive of the reprimand (as if reading was a crime) if someone get to know of her mission and that would be the end of it. She read to herself in silence and started reading her *Chaitanya Bhagavat*. She sat down with village women to read in a deserted spot. But gradually she was adored within the women's circle in her household for being able to read. Then she completed reading books that were there in her marital house – *Chaitanya Bhagabat, Chaitanya Charitamrita*, eighteen chapters of Jamini's *Bharat, Gobinda Lilamrita, Bidagdha Madhab, Prembhakti Chandrika, Balmiki Puran*. She trained herself to write at leisure.

When she became old, detachment began to set in. Old age transformed her body, mind, dress and habits. The moment her husband passed away she felt as the 'golden crown' on her head has fallen off. Her ordeal as a widow had set in then – "Even if a woman with a hundred sons is widowed…she is regarded as most unfortunate by the people." (Devi: 214) When she became a widow, she renounced the household.

Her story is a reflection on how a woman lost her identity, she was either someone's wife or someone's mother, she lost her name. Her narrative does not mention many details about her husband; she mentions that her husband was someone powerful. Rashsundari refers to an incident wherein she dealt with a case and she was the person in charge at home back then. Her son was not old enough to write a letter, but she composed a letter in his name to resolve the matter. When her husband came to know of it, he was pleased with her. This incident is an apt example of the skills women possessed to also deal with the outer world and establish her identity, but such opportunities were strategically taken away.

The Female Contemplation: A Discourse on Women's Writings

Literary pieces are often an articulation of their life and experiences around. Women's writings are a product of self-awareness accompanied by an intent and intention. It is often a narration of the oppression, thus creating a perspective from below. Women's writings of colonial India are significant not only to address the social injustices, but also for the construction of gender understanding during the period.

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In her 1899 essay, "Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl," Cornelia Sorabji, British India's first woman lawyer, addressed a pressing issue that preoccupied the subcontinent and its administrators: the modernization of the Indian woman. She claimed that Indian women were not ready for "modernity". But quite ironically as an unmarried, educated, professional woman, she embodied the very modernity for which, she claims, Indian women are not ready. Subverting gender roles, "Sorabji's self-making is an early example of the unexpected imbrication of modernity and misogyny within Indian feminism." (Kundu 2024) Sorabji was born in a Parsi-Christian family. Children of this family were well accomplished who received education in British universities. (ibid.) Even though she worked for women's rights, a sense of 'dichotomy' prevails in her works. Cornelia Sorabji provided legal assistance to 'upper-class Indian women in *purdah'*. (ibid.) Her work and achievements remains formidable in an age wherein women struggled to create her identity and space.

Cornelia Sorabji achieved a position at a time when the public discourse was only meant for men. Her writings reflect her ardent passion to emancipate women. *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) which is Sorabji's first publication is to be read "rather than as fiction' because "although it is a book of [short] stories, these are true pictures of Indian home-life. (Kundu 2024) The stories in *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* contains not only the miseries that women endured, but also has implications of caste stratification. Most of the stories in the books end with the death of female characters which is indicative of the death of their desires and wants. The stories irrevocably portray how social conditioning shaped them.

The story *Pestilence at Noonday* talks of the societal codes and how it affected the husband wife equation. There was absence of an egalitarian relation. It talks of the apprehensions that women had when her husband would be far away from her. The husband is said to repent for having to let them educate her. He scorns at her that even if she has learned foreign languages, she is still a Hindu wife. The story refers to the practice of dowry. He goes on to say, "Yes! The gods and fate have created you for my convenience and ministration; the only dignity which you can acquire will be incidental…Be thankful, little Sita, for what affection and indulgence you have been allowed, and while I am away you will be best please me by being a good daughter to my old father." (Sorabji 1901) Even though her husband was away for a long time, she hoped he would come back. She even rebuked the idea of a re-marriage. At the end she died as his wife, a *pativrata*.

The next story, *Love and Life* speaks of the jealousy amongst co-wives. How with age as she loses her youth, the husband loses interest – "We are all toys, toys of time and space; some battered rather more than others, but all toys, and soon to give place to newer ones." (Sorabji 1901) In *Love and Death* superstitious beliefs engulfed the life of a lady doctor. She was a prey to the belief that the gods would put a stay at the plague. *The Story of a Queen* tells how women who were educated – ones who were Western educated were perceived, while the *Greater Love*

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talks of the orthodox beliefs and a conservative attitude – the importance of having a son who had the sole right to light a funeral pyre, the only way to attain heaven and salvation. A woman's longing to enjoy the blessings of a marital life and how performing *sati* would complete her life and immortalise her husband form the core of the tale, *A Living Sacrifice, the Ganges Valley*, 1828. The *Achthar* mentions the importance of marriage of women – "The little children with no husbands prayed for good ones, and the married women with bad husbands prayed for better ones in another birth."

Conclusion: The Rage and its Articulation

"Even if someone did teach me the letters, where was the time to pursue that?" – These lines from *Amar Jiban* reminds of Virginia Woolf's work, A Room of One's Own (1929). She talks about how difficult it is for women to find a space to pursue her passion, "In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century." The 'invisibilisation' of women across social categories has been a problem over decades. Her voice has either been ignored or lost. But there have been women who found a way to express and communicate their rage to be heard, to empower and inspire the future generations. This articulation of rage which has been the outcome of centuries of oppression, either knowingly or unknowingly has helped building the much required resistance.

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