

# Quest For Identity in Women's Autobiographical Writing: Struggle for Space in Suprabha Datter Diary (The Diary of Suprabha Datta)

Dipendu Das

**Abstract**—Women's writing as a search and assertion of identity has been drawing critical attention in the academics largely since the 1960s, and subsequently the necessity of an alternative aesthetic in regard to women's autobiographical writing in particular was urgently felt. Considering the marginal female space in Indian society, it would probably not be wrong to assume that many of the autobiographical compositions were destroyed or perished owing to negligence, and most of the manuscripts which survived were not published.

In the context of the above the present paper concentrates on a diary written by Suprabha Dutta, an ordinary housewife in a middle class Bengali family in southern Assam, who was born in 1905 and died in 1945.

The text is an important document of interdisciplinary academic engagements that underlines the search of a female space in a patriarchal society and serves as an important source material for the study of the social, economic and political context of the pre-independent north-east India.

**Keywords**— identity, female space, diary, interdisciplinary..

## I. INTRODUCTION

**W**OMEN'S writing as a search and assertion of identity has been drawing critical attention in the academics largely since the 1960s, and subsequently the necessity of an alternative aesthetic in regard to women's writing in general and women's autobiographical writing in particular was urgently felt. Elaine Showalter, who coined the term Gynocriticism in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics", argues in favour of "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories". (Showalter 131) Though the work of gynocriticism has been criticised by later feminists for being essentialist, for following too closely along the lines of Sigmund Freud and New Criticism, and leaving out lesbians and women of colour, it cannot be denied that the significance of the concept lies in the fact that the theoretical postulate has drawn attention to a very important theoretical perspective.

Dipendu Das is an Associate Professor, Department of English, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India. Pin: 788011; email: dipendudas2011@gmail.com & dipenduds@yahoo.co.in.

If there are autobiographical elements in almost all creative writings, women's writings are particularly autobiographical in nature. The urge is to express one's own self, the desire is to see oneself in the mirror and the yearning is for a communication through expressive tradition may be, in the absence of anyone else, with oneself. That is the reason why most of the early women writings are autobiographical.

Considering the marginal female space in Indian society, it would probably not be wrong to assume that many of the autobiographical compositions could never be written, many of those written were destroyed or perished owing to negligence, the most of the manuscripts which survived were not published, and only a few of those published were translated into English or other languages.

In the context of the above the present paper concentrates on a diary written by Suprabha Dutta, an ordinary housewife in a middle class Bengali family in Silchar town of Assam, who was born in 1905 and died in 1945. Suprabha used to save some time from her busy daily household works to write a diary, though not on regular basis. The diary was written between 1925 and 1932 in an exercise book of 20 cm x 16 cm size. The first diary was written on 1st Ashar 1332 B.S. (Bengali year) (1925 AD). The date mentioned in the last diary (appears in the last half of the exercise book, leaving the rest of the pages blank) remained incomplete was 27 Ashar, 1339 B.S. (Bengali year) (1932 AD).

The geographical context mentioned in the diary is some places of the eastern parts of undivided India, presently situated in Bangladesh and in southern Assam. The region was, to a large extent, an underdeveloped area plunged in different rigorous social and cultural restrictions particularly for a woman where the only space left for a woman was the four walls of her kitchen.

The text is an important document of interdisciplinary academic engagements that demand a comparative approach transcending strict disciplinary barriers involving minority discourse, gender study, cultural study etc. The diary also serves as an important source material for the study of the social, economic and political context of the pre-independent India, particularly of the Northeast.

"Diaries have often furnished the historian with invaluable

material, supplying the absence of public records and furnishing minute and intimate details of manners and of motives that do far more to help us to understand the past than more formal records.” (Encyclopedia Americana). Feminist discourse has drawn our attention to the absence of the female in the traditional history, as the world that used to find an access in the history texts were the political, social, cultural and economic spheres, the outer world. Woman had no space there or even if any space was spared for her, it was extremely marginal in nature, and wherever she had any role to play (for example - in agriculture) was not made part of history. In this context feminist discourse has awakened us to the fact that history is made not merely of the so called ‘public sphere’ but also of the small stories happening within the four walls of ‘home’ which is not merely the insignificant ‘private sphere’. We have also realized that ‘personal is political’ (Hanisch’s 1969) and Gender studies have played a determining role in the revisiting and rewriting of human history.

In the absence of authentic materials in regard to women’s participation in the history books, feminist historians had to explore alternative methodology and seek evidence of female voice in female song or in the writings by women. Women’s writing can be divided into three heads – creative writing, autobiography and diary. The diary is considered to be the most authentic material of the three, as creative writing though may reflect the contemporary facts of history, tend to fictionalise and the writer of autobiography often do not include many important details considering them to be too personal. A diarist, on the other hand, tends to respond to the immediate context directly without any hesitation as there is no concern in regard to the presence of a known or unknown reader to control the unbridled expression of the writer. The diarist writes whatever s/he feels apt to be written in the diary. A diary, therefore, is also an important document of the socio-political, economic and cultural life of the period.

In this context Suprabha Datter Diary (The Diary of Suprabha Datta) (2008) may be considered an important text that provides not only an insight into the domestic sphere of a middle class family in the first three decades of twentieth century, the patriarchal framework, the marital life and the female space, but also serves as an important source material for the study of the social, economic and political context of the pre-independent India, particularly of the southern Assam.

Suprabha was born in 1905, the year of Swadeshi movement that swayed India with passionate nationalistic fervour. It is to be noted that the participation of women in Indian freedom struggle began with Swadeshi movement and significantly, Suprabha too became an activist in the Indian freedom movement in the later years of her life. It is also to be noted that the movements for social reformation in the nineteenth century was mainly aimed at the women and changing their status. Howsoever limited the impact might be some changes could be perceived as girls began to come out of the shell of the domestic arena to be educated at the schools. After a prolonged debate on the necessity of women education, the

pillars of the society decided that the women might get education but that education should prepare them in the great Indian tradition to become good housewives, good mother and devoted wives. They should become religious and help their respective families and husbands to remain in the path of religion and thus in turn play a significant role in building the society.

In the context of the emergence of this new patriarchal construct that appeared slightly liberal, a reading of Suprabha Datter Diary enlivens and recreates the female space in the middle class Bengali family of the early decades of twentieth century.

Suprabha was born in a middle class family that had a leaning towards Brahmo religion. A liberal minded government employee, her father was transferred in different places of eastern India. As such Suprbha received early education at different places. However, her studies at school came to a halt at the age of 15 after her father came back to Sylhet district, as it was considered that any more education might be a barrier in the way of finding a good match for her matrimonial alliance. However, that all these could not deter Suprapha from reading becomes evident from the depth of analysis of any issue in her diary and the quality of her writing. She was a truly educated person and a very cultured mind. An independent self that she possessed gets reflected in her diary that became her most trusted and only companion. In the midst of her daily busy schedule, the diary became her only private domain, her individual space, which she was not bound to share with anyone else.

A young girl of 19, Suprabha had a very romantic notion of marriage. She had not seen her husband before the marriage and so was keen to have a glimpse of the man she was getting tied for the rest of her life. As she recounts, “I could not control my desire to see my husband before the Shubhadristi (ceremonial first meeting between husband and wife).” [6th Falgun, 1332 (1925 AD)]. On the same day’s diary she mentions, “I could realize how the night came to an end. Why did the night come to an end so soon? Shyness, fear and thrill engulfed my whole being.” But all was not well on that night. “That night just on a trifle matter he became angry on me. He turned his back. I felt so bad till he turned towards me.” The note of disappointment finds reflection in the accounts of some other days. The husband goes out of station to earn and support the family. Suprabha waits eagerly for his letters. They do come but most of her questions remain answered. There remains a pain somewhere deep in the heart – a pain of being neglected, excluded and marginalized. In fact, in the second and the third decades of the twentieth century a new concept of ‘companionate marriage’ developed that considered both the partners as true companions, with equal share in weal and woe. It seems that Suprabha sought such a relationship in her conjugal life and was frustrated as she never could become a true companion of her husband. “I want to discuss everything with my husband, but he is so busy that he cannot spare more than just about 5 hours to spend with me. Spending time with

one's own wife is a matter of great shame for his orthodox society." [2nd Ashar 1332 B.S. (1925 AD)] The word 'his' is very significant here, as this underlines the fact that Suprabha does not consider this to be her society, where the space left for the female is demarcated by the over imposing patriarchal construct. Suprabha is a modern (not in the European model) educated Indian woman. On the one hand there is an urge to become a true companion of the husband in every sphere of life and on the other, an attempt to fit into the role 'ideal wife' constructed by the new patriarchy that emerged in the 19th century. As Suprabha writes, "Oh Lord Narayan kindly bless me so that I am able to leave the world remaining completely faithful to my husband... You give me strength so that I may leave the whole of the world aside to worship him." (18th Jaishta 1335). These sentences seem directly lifted from the manuals about the role of an ideal wife available in the 19th century. Suprabha is conscious of this dichotomy. "One side of me seeks to take refuge in the feet of Ramakrishna forgetting all the unhappiness of life. The other side wants to remain attached to the husband and all the woes of day to day life... the second side of the mind is stronger than the first one." [22nd Chaitra 1335 B.S. (1928 AD)]

One is struck with wonder at Suprabha's scientific approach and logical analysis. Her ability to document even at the moments of extreme personal woes such as the premature demise of her son is astonishing. The wail of the mother at the death of the two year old son reverberates throughout the diary, even then she recounts every detail of the Sradhdha ceremony and the rituals performed. The scientific and analytical mind gets an expression in her account of her abortion. She has observed minutely the changes in her body and mind even in her extreme pain and anguish. [20 Jaishta 1338 B.S. (1931)]. She has raised her voice on several occasions against the marginal space accorded to a woman. "The woman of a Hindu family cannot have more strength than that of the animal tied up for sacrifice to the deity." [18 Ashar 1335 B.S. (1928 AD)]. The liberal mind in her desperately utters, "A woman is told before her wedding that she would have complete freedom after her marriage. I believe the shackles become stronger after she gets married." [2nd Ashar, 1332 B.S. 1925 AD). All her life Suprabha tried to break these shackles, but failed because of the opposition she faced in the family. A woman with a keen insight it was not difficult for Suprabha to perceive that this was because she was born as a woman 'an inferior class', "Because I am a woman my wishes have no value, my words have no meaning... I wanted to stand on my own feet. But no one has any support to this. Is it not because I am a woman? ... I cannot go beyond the lines demarcated for me. [19th Falgun, 1335 B.S. (1928 AD)]. "Sometimes I feel like making everyone realize that I am not inferior in any way because I am a woman...I find it difficult to adjust myself to the lack of freedom that I encounter every moment in my life."

In the new patriarchy, family remained at the centre of the society. The intellectuals of the 19th century considered that

the position of woman should be central in any family. The woman will materialise the traditional concept of "Grihini Griham Uchayate" (wife occupies central position in a family) in the role of a wife.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who, even while accepting the new patriarchal construct, first provided the scope for women to come out of the traditional domestic arena. Gandhian nationalism gave a special status to women and the role of women in the freedom struggle without dissociating her from the domestic concerns. Gandhi sought to provide more space for women without advocating the wholesale change of patriarchal construct. There was a breath-taking abruptness about the entry of women into political life due to his influence. One moment they were not there, the next they were in the fore front of the scene. (Kumarappa 20) Women participated in political meetings and protest marches; bore lathi charge; courted arrest and even got shot. (Forbes 126) A good number of women from Hindu families in general and Bengali families in particular even in small towns and villages, participated in Gandhian movements.

Suprabha too got involved in the freedom movement in 1930-31 at Silchar and gradually became an activist. The reflection of the transcendence of the personal unfulfilled desires finds expression in the daily accounts of the two years of her involvement in the freedom struggle, when Suprabha jumped whole heartedly into the liberation movement. She gradually occupied a leading position remaining engaged in addressing mass gathering or party members and organising meetings and other agitation programmes. She seems at last was able to find a space for herself and thus to some extent at least counter the crisis of identity she had to undergo throughout her life.

Unlike the writer of an autobiography, the one who writes remaining conscious of the fact that the same will be read by many and in the process the recounting is filtered through the conscious self, the diary of Suprabha gives spontaneous expression to her most personal and private feelings as she knew that she was the only reader of her this most private document where no one else had any access. As a consequence the diary has acquired an unusual frankness and sincerity of expression that could rarely be found in the writing of a woman of the early twentieth century.

A reading of the text makes it clear that though Suprabha apparently accepted the dominant ideology of the patriarchal society she belonged to, the liberal self and the rebel in her could not accept the marginal space accorded to a woman within the four walls of the domestic arena. She rather decided to step out of the bound of the four walls of home, of course, after fulfilling the domestic responsibility at home.

The presence of the husband of Suprabha Dutta in the Diary is not as eloquent as his absence. It is true that several of Suprabha's complaints involve him. But it is also true that it was his attention, attachment and companionship that she always sought, and not merely because she considered her husband as godlike - 'Pati Parameshwar'. We do feel from the

Diary that he was also affectionate towards her. It is to be noted that the Diary in which Suprabha found her best companion, in fact, was a gift to her by her husband. It is also equally true that her husband had torn a few pages from the diary as he was angry on her on a few personal details she mentioned about a few relatives, which accounts for the a few missing pages from it and it was again the same man who handed over the diary to his son to read the same after his death. It was the same person of early twentieth century who supported his wife writing diary and later on allowing her to take part in the freedom movement.

Suprbha has mentioned the huge family burden on her husband. It is to be noted that the economic pressure in the 20s and the 30s of the 20th century left a tremendous mark on the structure of the large families in India in general and the Bengalis in particular. We are yet to know how the men in the first three decades of the last century born and brought up in the patriarchal tradition coped with such economic pressure on the family on the one hand and the changed concept of a new woman on the other.

In fact patriarchy sometimes also puts heavy pressure on the male. The nature of the pressures might be different from those of the female, but it was definitely difficult sometimes for a common man in the 19th and the early 20th centuries to completely break the construct. The transformation in the society has its impact on both the man and the woman, and Suprabha Datter Diary is an important text of Gender Studies and Cultural studies because it raises many issues pertinent to these discourses

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Datta, Suprabha. *Suprabha Datter Diary (The Diary of Suprabha Datta)*. Amalendu Bhattacharjee, ed., Silchar: Nandini Sahityo 0 Pathachakra, 2008.
- [2] Kumarappa, B, *Gandhi Towards Non- Violent Socialism*, Navjivan, New Delhi, 1957.
- [3] Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2000.
- [4] Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal is Political". [www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/ PIP.html](http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html)
- [5] *Encyclopedia Americana*. Volume 9. The Encyclopedia Americana Corporation.1918
- [6] Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics". Groden, Michael and Martin Kreiswirth, eds. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

**Dipendu Das** teaches English at Assam University, Silchar. He did his PhD on the plays of Arthur Miller and specializes in Drama Studies and Literary Theory, Indian English Literature and Translation Studies. He has presented papers and acted as chairpersons in more than 45 national and international seminars/conferences in Indian Universities and at different foreign universities. He has been awarded UKEIRI grant for UK-India Staff Exchange Programme in 2011. He has published extensively in national and international journals and books. He has jointly edited books titled *Ethnicity and Conflict: India and Canada (Social, Literary and Cultural Readings)* (2010), a theatre journal *Kushilav* (2007) and *Barbed Wire Fence: Narratives of Displacement from Barak Valley of Assam* (2012). He is also a creative writer and has published a Bengali short story collection, *Britter Bairey* (2008). A theatre activist, Dr. Das has written several plays and musicals for stage, radio and film script for television, many of which have won awards and received wide acclaim