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Negotiated agency and the sacred feminine: theology, domesticity, and feminist selfhood in Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*

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Abstract

The given paper revisits two classic works of women writing in Bengali, Rassundari Devi (1868/1897) *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, to follow a path of feminist self-expression that traverses the divine interiority to the rational utopia. Based on the lessons of feminist-theological readings of *Amar Jiban* (with an especial focus on Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal), the paper claims that Rassundari secret literacy is a theology of homemade piety, in which the knowledge process becomes a religious experience instead of a secular reform action. Her statement that God had all this planned makes a theological principle of agency in practice, which is to submit, making the submission itself become epistemic freedom. Inheriting this theological grammar, Rokeya restructures it into rational feminist ethics in *Sultana's Dream*, whereby knowledge takes the place of grace as the moral basis of justice. The paper conceptualizes negotiated agency as a theological and intellectual practice whereby the Bengali women were able to express both divine and rational power within the limits of patriarchy and colonialism. It contends that one can see a continuum between the domestic theology of Rassundari and the social rationalism of Rokeya and that it was not a break but a transition a step between concealed devotion and open enlightenment. The texts of South Asian feminist theology of the everyday, which together form an indigenous South Asian feminist theology of the everyday, are not opposites, but are modes of relational knowing.

Keywords: Rokeya, Rassundari, agency, feminine, feminist, theology, domesticity

Introduction

The intellectual history of the Bengali women is a lineage that develops and revolves around the bonded ways of religion, domesticity, as well as, colonial modernity. Two personalities in this crucible, Rassundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who re-established the moral and epistemic frontiers of their world in radically different but spiritually continuum ways of writing. Written by an illiterate housewife who was isolated in her andarmahah, *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana's Dream*, dreamed of by a Muslim reformer as a world ruled by women, at first sight seem to be opposites in terms of the text: the former is a religious text, the latter is a dystopian text. They both announce, though, an anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal theology that cannot separate religion and reason. The earliest document of female self-expression and literacy in the colonial Bengal, *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Devi, the first autobiography of an Indian woman, was long regarded as such. But, as recent scholarship like Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal has demonstrated, its importance is not simply in that it is a testimonial value but also in its theological re-packaging of the domestic as a hermeneutical space of sacred epistemology. By her frequent insistence on the fact that God brought it about, it is not religiosity humbleness or fatalism; it is co-agency of God. By declaring divine agency of her literacy, Rassundari is making the knowing a sanctified process. Religiosity is reading; and the reverse also holds true. The lamp, the kitchen, the script are the liturgy of a domineering theology by housework. The fact that she is not disobedient with religion is that she discovers through religion.

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This reorientation is in opposition to the prevailing historiography which places the education of women in the frames of colonial discourse of moral reform and development. Other feminist theologians like Rita Gross and Vasudha Narayanan have suggested that domestic religiosity tends to produce alternative epistemologies the so-called domestic theologies of the everyday in which knowledge is produced through embodied routine and affective labour. The *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari is a typical example of such a theology: her tears, her fatigue and her longing makes sacraments of knowing. Her divinity is not some otherness, but her incarceration, not out of it. The theological implications of this position go well beyond. Making household work darsan, the mutually sacred vision of woman and God, Rassundari opens what may be termed a feminist theology of immanence. In her narration the god does not liberate the woman out of domesticity but comes in domesticity. The vision of the words with her own eyes is to be able to have revelation by self-education in the literacy-a theology, which is done by the body, gesture, and eye.

When the domestic is sacralized in Rassundari *Amar Jiban*, the sacred is secularized in the *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain without leaving the building of morals. In rational utopia of Ladyland, wisdom and justice take the place of divine grace, but the principle of moral enlightenment is the same as in the vision of Rassundari. The solar-powered enlightenment by Rokeya is a literal interpretation of the metaphor of enlightenment in the oil lamp of Rassundari. Where the religion of Rassundari turns the household life into theology, the reason of Rokeya turns theology into ethics. A simultaneous reading of the two books in the postcolonial feminist-theological perspective enables us to stop thinking in the linear form of the passage of movement within the realms of piety to reason. Rather we observe a natural sequence-an epistemic transformation between veil and revelation. Intellectual history of the writing of Bengali women is therefore not a secular birth on the part of religion but the feminist rearticulation of religion as such: the conversion of devotion into epistemology, and of epistemology into justice.

The feminisation of devotion and the birth of feminist theology

The Bhakti tradition of democratizing with its focus against affect, intimacy, and grace, pivoted and opened in women the discourse of the sacred, which was liberating and confining at the same time. In spite of the fact that Bhakti devotion gave the power to the woman devotee to demand divine intimacy, it restricted her theological power to the sphere of affection and servitude. In this ambivalent heritage, the *Amar Jiban* (1868/1897) by Rassundari Devi can be discussed as a text that inhabits the devotional paradigm and simultaneously changes it. Instead of turning her back on the idiom of Bhakti, she redefines it as an epistemic grammar an intellectual and spiritual way of expressing divine knowledge under the restrictions of domesticity. The paradoxical basis of her theological approach is summed up in the statement that Rassundari makes in several occasions when she says that it was God Himself who had it all arranged (Devi 67). To the mindless looker, this may seem to be an act of meekness, the self-abasing submission of a woman who had been trained on the patriarchal religiosity. However, as well argued in but as Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial

Bengal that is an epistemic revolution: it re-constructs the divine will in the justification of feminine self-knowledge. By asserting that she is arranged by God, to guarantee that she can read and write, Rassundari essentially re-constructs grace as co-agency-a Godly position that conspires in her knowing. Compliance is, in such theology then not a partnership. The Goddess and the female mind are united in the revelation.

Karen Pechilis has noted that women saints in the Hindu traditions tend to act agency by means of its disavowal (2006, 112). The logic of this performativity is just what Rassundari follows in his I am nothing. Her perceived modesty is a figure of speech-a form of theology by denial that enables her to escape patristical criticism and at the same time claim the freedom of the epistemological. Taking the place of her own voice, she sanctifies the voice of God by crediting it to her. The process of writing has become a divine ventriloquy; a space of co-authorship between woman and God. This act is what can be called a feminist theology of relational agency the gesture of the surrender is the form of self-articulation.

Such theological revolution re-creates the domestic as a revelation space. Such practices are familiarized by feminist theologian, Vasudha Narayanan, as the domestic theologies of the everyday, where sacred knowledge is formed by embodied everydayness and sensual work (Narayanan 1996, 37) ^[18]. The kitchen, lamp and cloth of Rassundari, her universe of domestic toil and fatigue, is transformed to divine intelligence. She alters even the instruments of slavery to sacraments. The Embodied Devotion essay says, there is nothing metaphorical about her lamp, her kitchen and her sewing cloth-they are media of revelation. Every home action such as setting a lamp on, boiling a pot, opening a book is transformed into a liturgia. The house will be temple; the practice of reading, darsan, divine seeing of the divine by means of letters.

That is how, the spirituality of Rassundari can be termed as immanent and hermeneutic, scientific at least in this respect, neither transcendental or reformist. Instead of renouncing her enclosure, she infers divinity in it. Her literacy, which is done in secret and sanctity is an epistemological ceremony-a knowing act as worship. Her writing, when she says that, my heart yearned to peruse with her own eyes, indicates that she wished to learn but to have a revelation. Here seeing God is compared to reading. Such entwining of seeing and reading evidences the theological shift made of devotion as affect to devotion as knowledge-a shift which gave birth to feminist theology in colonial Bengal.

These nationalist and feminist theories of the earlier past, like Tanika Sarkar in Words to Win have admired Rassundari as the very icon of proto-feminist resilience, an autodidact against patriarchal hermetic. Her boldness does, though, take up a new value in a feminist-theological system. She criticizes patriarchy not by refuting but by changing. Her compliance is transformed into ontological opposition; her devotion is turned into praxis. To insist that God is an orderer of it is to insist also that God wants her to be taught, that her literacy is not a transgression, but in some manner a command of God. This reversal of godly will disrupts the very theological order that does not acknowledge women as intellectual beings.

The theology of Rassundari thus comes out as a theory of epistemic grace, a way of believing that knowing is the work of God. There is what is referred to by Rita Gross as

an epistemic reclamation, which she describes as a recovery of the ordinary as sacred (1996, 23). This recuperation takes place in *Amar Jiban*, through what may be called skin-hermeneutics: the reading, done during hard work and domestic tasks, becomes a way of coming into contact with God. She uses her broken hands, a result of all the housework, as tools of revelation. The first text on which divinity writes itself is her body, which predicts the future theological argument by Beattie that the body is the first text of revelation (Beattie 2013, 19) ^[2]. The fact that the lady is long lived makes her scripture authority.

This shift of domesticity to divine epistemology is the point of when Bhakti is feminist theology. The affective submission of Bhakti is restructured into an epistemic intimacy knowing that is created out of love, exhaustion, and grace. Feminine reinterpretation of devotee-deity relations does not give the former a hierarchical character but makes it dialogic. God is learning in her learning; the heavenly eye I put back. The subaltern woman, in this way, joins theology but it is not the same as resisting the holy, it is the redefinition of theology as relational, embodied and immanent.

Overall, *Amar Jiban* is feminized of theology that recodes the devotion as the type of epistemic practice. It indicates that the divine can be reached not by means of transcendence but through repetition, not by means of authority but by means of intimacy. The very style of writing that Rassundari does in the privacy of the night at home is thus theological and political: it spawns a South Asian feminist theology which is based on humility, embodiment, and concealed grace. The andarmahal becomes through her change into altar and archive-the birthplace of a theology in the tongue of ordinariness, the sanctuary of the light of an oil lamp.

Domesticity as sacred epistemology

The domestic domain, traditionally theorized as the grounds of women imprisonment, takes in *Amar Jiban* the apparently different theological connotation. In the case of Rassundari Devi, it is not just a ritual purity space or even a figurative feminine virtue that defines the house but a revelation. She experiences the divine as immanent in the dark shadows of the oil lamp, the repetitions of cooking, sweeping and child rearing. It is the same work which has fixed her subordination which serves to know God.

This has been christened as a theology of the everyday by feminist theologian Vasudha Narayanan, who defines the origin of sacred knowledge as embodied repetition: the gestures and routines of life itself (Narayanan 1996, 37) ^[18]. Such a theology is exactly what *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari does. Her story turns family fatigue into hermeneutic labour, into the tears her, into the kitchen her sacral epistemological site. She writes that she was never idle, from dawn to midnight my hands never rest. Even when she was doing these endless chores, He moaned in her heart (Devi 71-72). This complaint is not flight out of the house but its sacrament. The endless tasks that she refers to are transformed into a liturgy of the ordinary where God manifests himself through endurance rhythm.

The work of her household turns to her prayer, as observed by Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal, which perfectly defines the epistemic radicalism of the Rassundari theology. It is the repetitive, feminized labour, which the colonial-modernist and

Brahmanical discursivity had hailed as in productive or polluting, which to her is the very locus of the divine cognition. It is through her healing domesticity that she gets back not as restraint but sacrament. The fire which was formerly an embodiment of limitation has come to be the embodiment of divine revelation, the oil lamp a representation of epistemic revelation. This material imbrication takes place in transubstantiation. Her haptic world of her piety the warmth of the lamp, the feel of the page, the touch of the cloth turns into what Tina Beattie calls a bodily grammar of revelation (Beattie 2013, 19) ^[2]. There is no sensory that Rassundari can do without in terms of his spirituality. Her theology is carnal: the God is not there but in the movements of the body, in the toil of the hands, in the murmuring of the syllables. It is this synergizing of the embodiment and revelation that converts the domestic everydayness into a hermeneutic performance-a reading not only of Holy book but of the self as Holy book.

Rassundari's domestic theology also performs an epistemic reversal of colonial pedagogy. The colonial project of female education was premised upon surveillance and civility women were to be educated as moral mothers of the nation, their literacy supervised and socially useful. Rassundari's clandestine learning subverts this paradigm. She learns without permission, without institution, without supervision. Her secrecy is not shame but sanctity. In this respect, her theology of the concealed prefigures what Kwok Pui-lan comes to term "counterpublic theology" a style of sacred knowledge authored in invisibility, whispered, and disseminated through affective networks rather than public spheres (Kwok 2005, 49) ^[15]. Her *Amar Jiban* is not merely a confession; it is a clandestine scripture of the domestic, a theology of concealment.

This concept of concealment as holiness has deep implications for feminist theology. Western feminist discourse often associates agency with visibility speech, protest, and publication as modes of liberation. Rassundari's theology complicates this binary. Her agency lies not in speech but in silence, not in exposure but in concealment. As Embodied Devotion notes, her "hidden literacy" becomes an act of epistemic defiance a reclamation of divine authority through invisibility. Through the act of learning in secret, she asserts a radical freedom of the soul: a woman may serve God without witness, guidance, or sanction. Secrecy is her covenant, not her prison.

But such spiritualizing of household drudgery comes at a price. Her piety is written in exhaustion. "Perhaps He wishes me to find Him even here, among pots and pans, among tears and ashes," she writes (Devi 75). This line, so often quoted as emblematic of resignation, reads differently through a Caruthian lens of trauma and testimony. For Cathy Caruth, trauma speaks through repetition; it is both wound and witness. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari's fatigue becomes precisely that an embodied form of testimony where pain discloses meaning. Her God is not a patriarchal taskmaster but a participant in her suffering, a divine co-labourer who learns through her endurance.

In theological terms, this is a movement from transcendence to immanence, from the distant deity to the God within the pot, the flame, the tear. Rassundari's epistemology of fatigue thus becomes a theodicy of endurance. She does not seek to escape suffering but to transmute it into revelation. The very conditions of her oppression become the material

of divine communication. Her own body, inscribed with repetition and fatigue, is textus sacer the sacred writing through which God writes. Feminist theologians have been arguing for decades that embodiment is not an obstacle to religious consciousness but its inescapable prerequisite. Rita Gross insists that "women's spirituality is not a spirituality of elsewhere, but of here and now" (1996, 54). Rassundari lives this principle with uncanny precision. Her spirituality is nursery, kitchen, and wounded body. The sacred in *Amar Jiban* does not provide transcendence but intimacy. God is not discovered in renunciation but in relationship, not outside the home but within it.

This is also a theological reimagining of domesticity as an act of decolonial epistemic resistance. The colonial and Brahmanical orders each sought to regulate women's access to sacred and intellectual authority the former by rationalizing it, the latter by sanctifying its exclusion. Rassundari's *Amar Jiban* subverts both by positing an alternative epistemology: that divine knowledge can emerge from unlettered, unsupervised, domestic consciousness. Her literacy is not enlightenment in the colonial sense but illumination in the mystical sense. As is aptly put in the Embodied Devotion essay, "Her learning is unsupervised, secret, yet sacramental a decolonial theology of the hidden". It is in this context that the home looks like the most subversive of sacred spaces. The kitchen is a hermeneutic space in which body and text, erudition and piety, suffering and supplication intersect. The domestic everyday becomes scripture in the making. Every repetition of labour is an enactment of ritual presence of the divine a theology not of transcending but of staying with.

What Rassundari reveals, then, is not that the divine lies in freedom from the home but in its re-signification. Her andarmahal from the Sanskrit, the innermost chamber which stood for purity and restriction is her temple, her schoolroom, and her cosmos. In the radiance of her oil lamp, she performs the first feminist act of reading as revelation.

Amar Jiban domesticity is thus not a repressive situation but a religious practice: an epistemology of the everyday that grounds the divine in the profane. Through her hidden literacy, Rassundari establishes a new register of feminist knowledge one that unites grace and mind, toil and epiphany, weariness and illumination. Her home theology is not the rejection of bondage; it is a delineation of it as sacrament. Her voiceless voice, uttered in work and silence, marks the start of what we may term as a South Asian theology of survival a theology in which exhaustion is sacred, secrecy is divine, and any survival act an act of divine knowledge.

From domestic theologies to rational utopias: Rokeya's Feminist Theodicy

Whereas *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Devi elevates that household as the seat of divinity, Sultana Mulik as the dream of Sultana, by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, makes divinity social reasonableness. Co-written in English in 1905, Rokeya's utopian fiction is a short work depicting an imaginary world of Ladyland, a feminist world where peace, science, and education are the biggest priorities of this world as a result of overthrowing violence, ignorance and domination. Although both writings are usually perceived as the two epochs of femininity thinking the devotional past and the rational thinking future, they are in fact connected by the constant theological reasoning. Rokeya rational

utopia, instead of cutting its links with the devotional world of Rassundari, is gaining its epistemic thrust towards the outside-outwards of the lamp-lit spaces of the household to the sun-lit spaces of Ladyland.

In Rassundari theology, where he kept your word hidden, in the theology of Rokeya, I found the veil lifted, where he whispers some secret to his God, he speaks to the world by the medium of satire. But each of them expounds divine knowing. *Amar Jiban* concludes with the belief that the knowledge is sacred; Sultana Dreams starts with that belief as a social postulate. The relation between the two texts is not a linear process of development of faith to knowledge but an elaboration of what Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge In Colonial Bengal identifies as knowledges of the graced form of knowing, within which knowing is the enactment of divine will.

The God of Rassundari is one who orders such a thing, by grace; the Ordering of Ladyland, by Lady; is the one that orders such a thing by reason. They both use the light symbolically: the oil lamp, the sun lamp as the symbols of the light that is revealed. When the light of the lamp of Rassundari symbolizes the divine immanence into the home work, the light of the solar city by Rokeya generalizes this light, and metaphorical theological imagery becomes translated into technological modernity. Ladyland is not therefore the secular denial of the sacred, but the rational theodicy, the ideal state of things divine achieved, through the intellect of the people and moral harmony, in freedom.

In Sultana in Dream Rokeya develops what can be called a feminist theodicy of knowledge—a combination of divine justice and human reason. The miracle in Ladyland is not the work of the divine but the intelligent work of women, their ability to sympathetic, arrange and create. Nevertheless, this is not the positivist reason of the colonial pedagogy. Rokeya utopia is what Roushan Jahan has described as a moral spiritual vision in camouflage as rational reform (1988, 44). Knowledge in Ladyland plays the same role as grace in *Amar Jiban*: it saves, changes, and enlightens. The solar of enlightenment enlightenment is literally solar, and Rokeya used it as such in her moral light. Viewed in terms of the theological continuum that was laid down by Rassundari, *Sultana's Dream* is the manifestation of a secret theology. The domestic piety of Rassundari, his secrecy and surrender made in Rokeya's fiction a civic ethics, compassion, mutuality and harmony. The inner light of the would-be soul in *Amar Jiban* reaches that distance where there is the light of the town-folks. The theology of Rassundari brings divinity into the house, whereas the rational feminism put forward by Rokeya brings it into the city. But the general form—that of sanctioning knowledge—is the same.

Such coherence comes out clearly as the subtext of the two books is viewed through the context of feminist theology as outlined by Rita Gross and Kwok Pui-lan. The idea of the epistemic recovery of the ordinary, which Gross gives was first expressed in the writings of Rassundari; in the writings of Rokeya, it is given political manifestation. Ladyland by Rokeya is an ordered world because it once again knows the moral side of knowledge what Gross describes as the sacralization of reason by care (1996, 56). On the same note, the concept of postcolonial feminist theology discussed by Kwok Pui-lan that refers to reclaiming of divine knowing under the surface of history explains both approaches of writers (2005, 49). Rassundari rescues divine knowing out

of the domestic hidden domain; Rokeya out of the colonial and patriarchal systems of reason. They both recover on an epistemic scale although in two idiomatic forms, Rassundari by revelation, Rokeya by reason.

The fact that Rokeya uses English as a medium in itself is a theological step. By appropriating the language of empire she is engaged in what Homi Bhabha might refer to as a hybrid enunciation, i.e. writing in the language of empire to express a native ethics of enlightening. Her parody of English sane speech is assimilation at its reverse. The masculine imperial image of progress is sneered at by the Ladylanders through their familiarity with science and logic. The ethical radiance of Ladyland is not the material excellence of a technology but a moral radiance that is an imitation of the grace of God.

On its part, the text by Rokeya borrows the theological terms of revelation and righteousness despite being structured under the science fiction genre. The solar theology which rules Ladyland is a sort of moral light and reason instead of ritual, but sacral intent. The sacramental becomes scientific: oil lamp is replaced with solar energy, study replaces prayer, and peace replaces penance. It is that grace which is theologically developed grace to justice. The women of Rokeya make their own world, as the God of Rassundari arranges her world. The moral will of the latter becomes the divine one of the former.

The series of Rassundari through Rokeya does not brook secular feminist or traditional theological interpretations. It disfigures the idea of emancipation as a need to separate oneself from religion and hints, instead, that feminism in colonial Bengal was something of a theological restatement. The Sultana inherits of Rassundari the spiritual grammar whose sanctification of knowledge, its heroism of care, the Rama-Sita of spiritual schools; and in the rational utopia Ladyland, rewrites it. The process of convertible literacy into social pedagogy, the revelation into social justice, the transformation of theology into ethics is not a discontinuity, but a change: the development of theology into social justice.

In this regard, therefore, the fiction of Rokeya achieves what may be termed as the secularization of grace: this is, the process of transforming the divine light into humanist reason. Still, her rationalism does not want to eliminate the moral attitude of piety. Her principles of criticizing patriarchy, colonialism and ignorance is not politicized and more soteriological in nature because salvation is expected to come with an education and an ethical order. Ladyland therefore is not only a political utopia, but a moral heaven and a blessed world by the divine power of the illuminated knowledge.

When the theology of hidden literacy as expressed by Rassundari spelled out the sacredness of knowledge in circumstances of confinement, then the utopian of feminism as presented by Rokeya extrudes the sacredness of knowledge into the social practice. They both are second parts of one theological arc: an implicit devotion of the home to the explicit justice, an obscured grace to the transparent light. The epistemic holiness which started in the lamplight of Rassundari, has its completion in the sunlight of Rokeya. In their own divergent and converging idioms, the two women build their respective theology of feminist knowing that gathers grace and brains, faith and freedom, devotion and reason.

Therefore, it is worthwhile not to perceive *Sultana's Dream* as the secular counterpart of *Amar Jiban*, and think about it as the extension of the same, and it is more worthy of being thought about as the logical extension of the same, of devotional epistemology of Rassundari, in the field of social life. Within their struggle, we can see the lines of the emerging South Asian feminist theology that has a distinct character: from the silence of the home we see to the brightness of the utopian, where the divine and the rational are being married to the glory of mutually understanding.

Negotiated agency as theological method

These twin Rassundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: there is a spectrum of negotiation between her, a dainty, manoeuvring back and forth between self-denial and self-assertion, mystery and prophecy, devotion and criticism. Both writers work in patriarchal and colonial epistemes, which withhold intellectual power on women. But each of the two works within those limits a mode of knowing which is not resistant or compliant. Their agency is negotiated, although this negotiation is not a compromise but method-what can be referred to as a theological method, which can be described as feminist strategy of stating divine and rational authority within systems of oppression of them.

To Rassundari, the agency is expressed through the so-called theology through disavowal of the Ascent Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal, which refers to theology as the disavowal, which is a paradox of practice; it is the means of asserting divine co-agency using the language of surrender. I did not learn through my own power. What was a woman supposed to hope to achieve such an outcome? He is the one who orchestrated it all by God Himself" (Devi 67). The declaration contained in it, which is superficially submissive, is structurally subversive. She writes her learning in an area outside social criticism when she defines her literacy as a product of divine intervention. Her humility is rhetorical, her subjugation epistemic in that by implying to be an instrument of the divine will she validates her violation of gender norms of knowledge. This renunciation, therefore, becomes her tactic of theology the tactic of redefining authorship as revelation.

Women have frequently relied on the agency of a relational humility, as Rita Gross notes, agnostically setting up selfhood within, not in opposition to, the divine order (1996, 54). An example of this relational humility is Rassundari *Amar Jiban* but differs by defining it as epistemic autonomy. She is not destroyed but becomes extended when she describes herself as nothing: she is the one on which divine knowledge is poured out. The divine will that orders it all is not something imposed on it but a light within an individual. She breaks down the divide between obedience and authorship in theological terms, developing a feminist co-creation theology. God does not do anything on her behalf, God does through her. This domestic woman thereby turns into a divine interlocutor and her literacy is a sacrament of reciprocity.

The procedure of negotiation used by Rokeya differs but in structural terms is similar. Rassundari conceals her theology behind the rhetoric of surrender, whereas Rokeya is unveiled about the patriarchal side through the rhetoric of irony. Sultana has used satire as the logical sensitization to disavowal that follows devotion. Her Ladyland, a utopian society, is based on a complete reversal of the gender roles to the point that the theological sarcasm of the subjugation

of the male gender can be seen: in case the creator God gave both genders the powers of reason, why would the men receive all knowledge in their possession? Her irony is her revelation. By employing narrative inversion, she is acting what could be called rational theology, a moral vision which employs reason to put the universe back into harmony. Both of them do what Kwok Pui-lan refers to as postcolonial feminist theology a reclamation of divine and moral knowledge of the underside of history (Kwok 2005, 49) ^[15].

Table 1: Comparative theological and feminist modes in *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana's Dream*

Mode	Rassundari Devi, <i>Amar Jiban</i>	Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, <i>Sultana's Dream</i>
Language of articulation	Devotional humility	Rational irony
Theological stance	Agency through disavowal	Agency through inversion
Epistemic strategy	Hidden literacy (faith as cognition)	Revealed rationality (reason as grace)
Domain of revelation	Domestic interior (lamp, hearth, letter)	Public utopia (sunlight, city, science)
Mode of divine knowledge	Immanent co-agency with God	Ethical illumination through intellect
Form of feminist speech	Prayerful confession	Satirical discourse

These modes are not similar in terms of content but in terms of method: they both simultaneously formulate negotiated agency as a theological process. In both of them, power is redefined as something not of domination but of relation; authority not as something possessed but as partaken in. The surrender of Rassundari and the irony of Rokeya are two versions of the same theological discourse the female version of saying yes.

This relational epistemology redefines radically the terms of feminist resistance beyond the colonial Bengal. Instead of making emancipation a secular exercise of self-assertion, the two authors make it a process of reconnection of divine and human, sacred and rational, woman and world. The agency of Rassundari's divinely ordained literacy and that of Rokeya are both found in relation and not rupture. They preach what is termed by Rita Nakashima Brock as relational salvation, that is, liberation not through severance, but right relation (1995, 22). Both fail to realize that knowing is the way to salvation, since it is the way to regain the harmony: between woman and God, between reason and devotion, between inner and outer worlds.

It can also be negotiated across the power registers by their respective rhetoric, confession in Bengali prose and the satirical narrative in English, by Rassundari and Rokeya respectively. Rassundari canonizes the folk, he changes the vernacular tunes of confession into the liturgy of devotion of femininity. Rokeya secularizes the sacred, using the language of the colonizer to create the indigenous order of morality. The two interfere with language hierarchies as well as power structures with their mediums chosen: one by making the vernacular a holy tongue and the other by making the imperial prone. Language, itself, in both instances, becomes sacramental: the means with which both divine and feminist epistemologies are re-united. Additionally, the narrative form of both authors carries out theological hybridity. *Amar Jiban* combines the hagiography and autobiography, and the writing itself is a confession-scripture. The genre of *Sultana, Dream*, is a blend of allegory, parable and utopian satire which results in a prophetic like type of genre. Their writings are not just literary but liturgical: they all become a ritual of revelation, a genre of writing that is mediating between word and world. This hybridity is parallel to the concept of R. S. Sugirtharaj, the so-called postcolonial hermeneutics of revelation (2001, 229) meaning the interpretation of divine

They are different in their methods such as faith as opposed to irony and concealment as opposed to proclamation but similar in their process to sanctify knowledge as relational, embodied and just. In both of them, feminist becoming is not discontinuity in itself, but re-articulation, not opposition to the sacred, but remaking of it.

This similarity of structure of negotiation can be imagined as a flow between two poles of theological discourse:

knowledge by using the touch of historical and linguistic underprivileged.

At this, the negotiated agency is not merely one of the survival strategies of the past, but a theological epistemology. Rassundari and Rokeya perform what may be termed relational knowing ethics, a feminism, which asserts divine sanction, not through disobedience but through intimacy, and rational authority, not through imitation but through moral inversion. In their books, it can be seen that agency, divinely conceived, need not talk, rebelliously; it could whisper, laugh, ask, and shine. Therefore, reading *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana's Dream* simultaneously is to come across a theological project, namely, the sanctification of the act of negotiation itself. Their approaches, which are devotional submission and satirical reversal, are two companionate vectors of the same epistemic horizon where the faith and the reason can find their reconciliation in an ethic of feminist knowing. In this respect, both writers belong to what perhaps may be termed a Bengali feminist theology of relation, a conception of divinity not in the form of patriarchal master, but as a co-learner, a co-sufferer, a co-creator in the process of the development of intellectual womanhood. Their agency is bargained, yes-but therein is the deepest freedom: the freedom to rewrite the concept of what is sacred and grounded and true.

Hidden and Revealed: Language, Secrecy, and Form

On the question of language as it can be made visible, hidden, sanctified, is at least at the very center of both *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana's Dream*. In the case of Rassundari Devi, it is where the transgression and transcendence of the Word happens; in the case of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain it is where the Word undergoes reform and revelation. Both authors are negotiating the politics of articulation in a world where women speech and literacy are policed. Their own approaches to language, i.e. domestic vernacular of Rassundari and cosmopolitan English of Rokeya, carry out the sacred politics of concealed and disclosed theologies. By writing colloquially in Bengali there is a two-fold charge involved in *Amar Jiban*. On the one hand, it is the embodied idiom of the kitchen and the courtyard-the rhythm of colloquial speech in prose. On the contrary, it practices a declaration of theology: revelation can exist in the colloquial, male priesthood is not the owner of divine truth. This is defined by Embodied Devotion and Feminist

Knowledge in Colonial Bengal as hidden theology-her silence as holiness, her tongue as prayer. It is the simplicity of her speech, deprived of ornament and abstraction, which does what might pass for the grace of the unschooled, a mediated sacramentisation of that expression which has never been learned which is the medium of the divine.

It is prose, in which Rassundari never aims at literary magnificence. Its beat is personal, its language household, its theology experience. All the lines are between confession and sin. And the letters were calling out to me, I did not know how to read, yet the letters were calling out to me, as she writes-another moment which sums up her theological procedure. To her, literacy is forbidden and impossible: it is the place of grace in language. To touch letters is to touch the divine. The sensory closeness of her studying, of her following of syllables in the light of the lamp, of her chanting prayers to the books, reduces literacy to darsan, the reciprocity of woman and of divinity. Writing is then a rite of experience: the word revealed, the sentence sacramental.

Her colloquialism, which, according to male critics of the time, was scorned as either unsophisticated or as simple, practices a radical theology of the mundane. The force of her language is lapsed at home-gradual, rhyming, made up of incantations. Her writing is liturgical not in form but spirit. She carves the divine into the syntax of the banal by writing in the language of servants, mothers and housewives. Consequently, *Amar Jiban* does exactly what Rita Gross calls the epistemic recovery of the ordinary (1996, 23): One that involves recuperating everyday life as the theological speaking place. The vernacular is made the revelation. Wherever the theology of Rassundari is obscurity and the invisible that of Rokeya is visibility and upside-downness. It is in English and, as such, Sultana is revealing the secret world of women at making the hidden visible by the idiom of the colonizer. The very language of Rokeya is a political-theological action: she uses the imperial language to emulate its power not to emulate the language of authority, but replace its epistemic dominance. The decolonial imagination in the world of *Sultana's Dream* is the voice of the colonizer. Rokeya depicts a feminist utopia differently through the technique of English expressiveness, which Homi Bhabha calls mimicry as mockery to show that a rhetorical intervention playfully prevents the imposition of this new grammar upon the rationality of the colonial regime. But there is more to Rokeya utilizing English than a mere political imitation, and her usage of English is theological intervention. Her language works the reverse of the secretiveness of Rassundari-it exteriorises revelation. The logicity of her writing is the reflection of the ethical brightness of Ladyland. And her sentences are crystalline, aphoristic, made not to be ornamental. We do not permit men to emerge out of the mardana she writes, calmly ironic but containing deep moral condemnation. Such ironic withholding turn's language into revelation: all reversal of gender roles reveals the theological nonsense of patriarchy. Rokeya via this linguistic inversion gives a rationalized version of this epistemic sanctification that drives *Amar Jiban*. Her English is not secular, it is glimmer, oracular. She gives the light of morality of divine knowledge a translation into the light of rationality of education and science. Her utopian prose in theological terms constitutes the uncovered theology discourse in which the truth becomes visible, clear and satirical. Scientific jargon of Sultana Dreams solar energy, laboratories, flying cars etc.

makes ritual way give way to reason, but the devotional form of revelation remains. Knowledge is grace, only endowed with the syntax of progress.

It is their theological continuum that is characterised by the dialectic of the hidden and the revealed. Theology Apophatic Rassundari Rassundari theology is an apophatic, a secretive, self-effacing mysticism. The is kataphatic-the enlightenment by words and reasoning and by revelation and revelation. But the two modes maintain one another. Without concealment, revelation would cease to be profound, without revelation, secretion would cease to have a point. The oil lamp of Rassundari and the solar lamp of Rokeya are analogies of this chain: one is flickering in darkness of seclusion, and the other is the one that illuminates the expanse of open field of reason, but they both reflect the same epistemic light. Informally, the two texts represent this dialectic of hiding and revealing in their genre hybridity. *Amar Jiban* is a mixture of confession, hagiography and autobiography-a mixture, which changes personal memory into the informing of the holy. It is the self that is put in scripture, the household that in theological allegory. In its turn, Sultana, her Dream, is a mash-up of parable, satire and prophetic utopia-the form that makes imagination an ethical command. The two texts are indistinct literature and revelation. Their narrative patterns are not vehicles of theology; it is theology that acts out in terms of narration.

This official hybridity is associated with the idea of R. S. Sugirtharaj to construct the hermeneutics of revelation in postcolonial context, the divine is not understood in dualistic terms of transcendence but as immanent text (2001, 229). In the case of Rassundari, her own body and home life is the immanent text and in the case of Rokeya, her immanent text is the social order that she envisions. Both narrative proposes itself as the labouratory of theology: One labours, a confessional labour, the other a labial labour: That of Just Diction. The combination of these makes them a two-text South Asian feminist theology-*Amar Jiban* the gospel of hidden grace, Sultana the Dream the revelation art. The language arts of such texts, therefore, are the politics that highlight the further logic of their feminism; the belief that knowledge, whether spoken in the colloquial or spoken in the empire, are marvellous. To Rassundari, language is an intermediary of divine intimacy, and to Rokeya, an intermediary of social revelation. What theology itself frequently commands or even prohibits both authors have their language do: they allow it to represent the divine feminine. Words in their hands are sacraments of knowing. The local Bengali term and the neat English expression accomplish one and the same thing, namely to demonstrate, by varying levels of light and darkness, that the very gesture of voice is sacred. The whole gamut of South Asian feminist theology is played out between the veil of *Amar Jiban* and the exposure of Sultana with regard to the veil and the unveiling, faith and knowledge, silence and expression.

Feminist Genealogy: From epistemic devotion to ethical reason

Intellectual and theological spectrum between *Amar Jiban* and Sultana has dreams follows the history of women knowledge in colonial Bengal-behind doors reading of religious letters into an outright proclamation of feminine morals. Nevertheless, this is not a linear account of the development of faith to reason. Instead it is a linear

progression of epistemological change: devotion turns into cognition; justice turns into cognition. Rassundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain both begin a South Asian feminist tradition where knowledge is a sacrament of the divine, a manner of relation as opposed to domination a conversation between the divine, the self, and the world. The origin of such genealogy lies in Rassundari, his *Amar Jiban* is a theology of the banal which redefines a piety as epistemic practice. Her study is not a parody of male rationality but her hermeneutic of grace in question. According to her view as presented in scheme in the book, Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal, her literacy is theology of agency through surrender-an epistemic revolution in which obedience is turned into ontology. Her argument that God put it all together recreates divine will as co-creative as opposed to coercive. She does not rebel against patriarchy by denying it; she reworks its religious vocabulary herself, also using those symbols of the hierarchies as the instruments of revelation, lamps, kitchen, cloth. Depending on endurance and yearning of the body and the mind, thereby, makes Rassundari feminize Bhakti as grounded on the revelation. The need to see the words with her own eyes is turned into a metaphor of striving of the female devotee to get the knowledge without any intermediaries. She does not need to free herself of the house but to enlighten it. This religious faith, epistemic devotion, in which even the act of learning is prayer, is what the core of an indigenous feminist theology is: a spirituality in which knowledge and domesticity are equally sanctified as forms of grace.

Rokeya adopts this theology but reforms it in terms of the rationalist language of reform. In *Sultana's Dream*, piety turns out to be moral and the light is already education. Knowledge has ceased to be secret, mystic, it is solar, there is something shared. Not only is Ladyland lightened up technologically, but also in the moral sense in a sort of transfiguration of the divine light fluttering through the oil lamp of Rassundari into the light of civil peace. As the narrator of Rokeya notes, we nurture the brain and not the sword-the statement that turns the theology of grace expressed by Rassundari into the politics of peace. The two texts are regarded as constitutive of an epistemic devotion to ethical reason, which is simply a dialogic movement. The sacred secret involving Rassundari and the publicity of Rokeya is the act of a diverted feminist theology: the rediscovery of enventient knowledge and its transfer to the vision of morality (Rita Gross 1996, 43). Their opposition is not, therefore, oppositional, but generative. Rassundari makes revelation within himself; Rokeya beyond herself. The former changes knowledge into faith, the latter transforms justice into faith. When united, they reconsider the divine as not as much of a patriarchal power but rather a binding known-relational force connecting the means of knowing, caring, and creating. This is a challenge to the secular historiography of the emancipation of women in colonial Bengal. The eventualization that makes Rokeya the reformist rather than the pious Rassundari is the misconception of both. They are not in the succession of time but evolution theologic. The feminism of Rokeya does not express itself as the denial of a devotion, but in a different key. Her rationalism also receives the moral structure of Bhakti as it loses its ritual restrictions. Differently put, her science is spiritualized reason, her feminism a theodicy disguised as morality.

In this sense, we can not have Bengali feminism as a result of secular disintegration but theological transformation. It starts with the whispering of Rassundari in his domestic darkness and ends with a declaration by Rokeya in the sun of reason. The change between the oil lamp and the solar power is not about the development of superstition to science but the spread of light-individual revelation to the light of the whole. Enlightenment in its real meaning is not the opposite of faith as shown by both women; it is the fulfillment of faith. It is also this theological genealogy that reformulates the connection of the private and the public in the history of women intellectuals. Rassundari in *Amar Jiban* tames down theology and proves that revelation may happen among pots and pans. That domestic theology is politicized in *Sultana of dream* by Rokeya and extends its care ethics to a social order model. They both oppose the colonial division of inner virtue and outer reform the dichotomy that Partha Chatterjee described as the inner realm of national culture (1993, 120). Rassundari converts that internal realm to sacred epistemic space; Rokeyas expands it to the exterior into the realm of civic space. The outcome is a progression of feminist thinking, which fades away the opposition between the spiritual and the rational, the home and the world, the devotee and the citizen. In these regards, the two women are also expressing what Kwok Pui-lan calls a postcolonial feminist theology of relation (2005, 49) a theological mode that does not exist in transcendence but rather in immanence, not in abstraction but in relation. Their deity is personal, incarnate and epiphanic. The God of Rassundari is the god who learns, Ladyland the goddess of Rokeya is the governor of knowledge. Both put aside the patriarchal figure of the all-powerful god with an active god one that exists alongside women, in their intellect and labour. Like their feminism, their God is collaborative.

This feminist genealogy, which has descended since *Amar Jiban* to *Sultana's Dream*, thus, is not the evolution of religion into reason but theology into ethics. Rassundari is the author of the primitive scripture of womanly grace, Rokeya is its logical commentary. The former makes knowledge holy and quiet; the latter by means of a satire. The epistemic piety of one party transforms into the ethical justification of the other, both expressing a distinctly Bengali theology of liberation based on interrelationship, but not discontinuity. Finally, both texts bear witness to one thing: the belief in knowing, which is a belief of loving, and that loving is an acting. Knowledge is a tool of power, but a kind of grace; reason is not destruction of faith but its expression among men. It is evident that feminist freedom in its profoundest meaning is neither secular nor theological, but relational because of what is written. Enabling one to live in the tension between the concealed and revealed, between piety and equity, and to inhabit the tension, is a capacity to transport that tension and that is revelation. Through such efforts, Rassundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain leave to South Asian feminism a more than respectable genealogy not of rebellion but of reverence-a tradition which does not seek its truth elsewhere than in its repeated reinterpretation. The language of feminist knowing is the difference between the murmur of the prayerful whispering of Rassundari and the ironic writing of Rokeya.

Conclusion

A single reading of *Amar Jiban* and *Sultana Dream* reveals one beholding the working of a South Asian feminist

theology one that itself glorifies the knowing act as a divine manifestation. Throughout the space of thirty-years and the seemingly separating aspect of piousness at home and rationality in the outlets, Rassundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain are talking about some linear discourse of divine epistemology. Both use her limited world the one within the sphere of the andarmahal and the other within that of colonial modernity to create a realm of revelation. The only thing which unites them is the unity in the belief in the imminence of the divine, that he is not some abstraction but is an immanent one, that he is a co-learner, a co-sufferer, a co-producer in the work of women knowledge. The earliest expression of this theology was in the *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari. Her reading is a sacrament of resistance, a miracle of God in a way of undermining patriarchal order not by disobedience but by being sanctified. The domestic to her is prison and metaphor, altar: kitchen, lamp and book are those places where there are Man and woman co-knowing. Her proclamation of it being all arranged by God thereby instituting what Embodied Devotion and Feminist Knowledge in Colonial Bengal deems a feminist theology of agency by way of surrender is therefore in a divine epistemology wherein humility makes method, and secrecy grace. Her liberation is not uprising but revelation: the finding of Godly closeness in the pattern of perseverance.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain applies this theology of grace to the social and rational world. Sultana is changing the secret epistemology of Rassundari into the open ethics, changing the divine light into the civil one. Education and reason have been brought in Ladyland to serve in the place of ritual as agents of justice, but the moral order is theological, with peace, compassion, and care as secularized versions of grace. The feminism of Rokeya, by no means denying the sacred, transforms it into moral light. Her logical utopia thereby fulfills that epistemic surge where one may say, the wave of secret grace to the wave of light visible. Both women, in their two very different idioms, express a theology of bargained liberation. Their agency is not the result of breaking structures but is rather of their reconstruction. This is a strategic surrender on the side of Rassundari, an epistemic obedience, a devotional satire on the side of Rokeya, a moral reason. Both of them negotiate the religion, language, and gender limits to express the idea of freedom not as disunity. With this they align themselves with the fundamental trend of feminism that autonomy does not imply isolation nor is knowledge necessarily critical and unloving, rudimentary and divine. Such a negotiated freedom model derails dominant binaries between religion and reason, devotion and emancipation, the private and the public, which have traditionally defined the historiography of women writing in colonial Bengal. It challenges us to read both the texts not as the levels of the straight line development of secular modernity but as the articulations of the same relational theology. The reading between their lines indicates that divine does not have to be left behind so as to make the feminist project successful, but it should be rethought in terms of the women experience as a repository of ethic and epistemic power. It is in this respect that Rassundari and Rokeya come out as not only literary characters but also theologians of life. The lamp as theology, as a shaky, wavering luster kept alive by the hand of dominar work is anticipated in the theology of the sun, in which Rokeya also anticipates making the case of a rational, just world, is foreshadowed by Rassundari and his theology

of the lamp. It is a space between these two lights which contains the spectrum of sacred knowing: of the secret prayer of the shadows of the andarmahal to the open expression of the enlightenment in the gardens of Ladyland. One enlightens the other; a unanimous theology of grace and justice emerges between them. Their heritage lies not within the history of the writing of Bengali women, thus; but with the larger project of feminist theology itself. We know that as Rita Nakashima Brock puts it, salvation is not separation but right relation (1995, 23). Both of these relations are carried out through the divine order of Rassundari and rational harmony practiced by Rokeya. Both of them do not think of freedom as a process of being free of the world, but revitalized feeling of closeness with it: via thought, attending, and moral imagination.

In this regard, the theology they release is highly decolonial. It stands against western liberal formula of freedom in the form of individual autonomy as well as the Brahmanical construal of virtue in submission. The third way can be seen in their writings: a theology of relation which they find by the mutual gaze of the divine and the human, of knowledge and grace. And it is this bargained liberty that infuses their writings: and is a liberty that consists not of disruption but of discovery, which is not of conquest but of communion. Mainstream: The same sacred flame that is the light of epistemic grace burns between the oil lamp of Rassundari and the solar lamp of Rokeya. It is the light that makes literacy to be revelation, secrecy to be sacred, satire to be morals. It is the light of feminist knowing which does not recognize the divine as the patriarch judge but as the partner-in-thinking and partner in labour in women. Reading them jointly, we then beckon to think of the history of Indian feminism as self-discovery on the part of theology by women themselves. Feminism in this instance does not consist in the denial of religion but in its ethical consummate; such theology is not the adversary of the freedom, but it essentials itself. To put it in their own words, the sacred is present in the struggle of people, and even freedom itself is the Holy act of knowing. We can therefore of the pedigree which starts with the secluded realm of *Amar Jiban* and continues with the light dream of Ladyland a sort of theology of relation—a South Asian theology of the commonplace, in which revelation is homely, knowledge grace, and freedom negotiated and actual. Their truth lies in between a hidden devotion and a revealed reason, in the truth that all the acts of knowing, in their humbleness and continuity, are acts of divine love.

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