

Telling Women's Lives: A Study of Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi's Autobiography "Jeevan Jeevan Bor Onupom"

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Abstract:

Autobiographical writings by women directly reflect crucial differences about women's sense of 'self'. They are representative of not only the protagonist's self but also epitomizes the society of which she is the part. Autobiographical writings by women have concentrated on issues like 'voicing a female subjectivity, textuality and sexuality'. The female autobiographical writers have tried to voice the 'unsaid' aspects of their life. Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi's autobiography *Jeevan Jeevan Bor Onupom* (2016) is not merely a chronicle of events but a powerful philosophical statement and a testament to human resilience. The autobiography is a powerful first-person narrative that chronicles a journey from a state of enforced helplessness to one of self-determination.

Keywords: Telling, Representative, Female Self-representation, Assamese autobiography.

The very possibility of an autobiography earmarks certain tropes and binaries around which the subject primarily navigates: the self and other; the private and public; margin and centre; the interior and exterior; inclusion and exclusion; fidelity and lies, etc. Employed effectively by women writers to write themselves into history, it not just embodies representations of the self but encompasses the desire to reclaim certain vital aspects of the culture where women lives are reduced to insignificance.

(Writing Gender, Writing Self)

Autobiographical writings by women directly reflect crucial differences about women's sense of 'self'. They are representative of not only the protagonist's self but also epitomizes the society of which she is the part. There is always a desire to claim substantial position in the cultural sphere.

Her life is built around binaries: public and private, margin and the center, interior and the exterior. She is caught between her self-representation and reality. Women autobiographer's works in recent times have been taken seriously in literary, cultural and historical circle. They have been considered as fertile avenues of explorations of how self is conceived and represented and recreated historically. They also take into account how the female subject position struggle for autonomy with predefined gender roles. The feminist debate on self-representation demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject. Aparna Lanjewar Bose in her book "Writing Gender, Writing Self: Memory, Memoir and Autobiography" substantiates:

... Its production and reception in the recent decades testify to the ongoing struggle of women for autonomy and agency in a society with predefined gender roles. Conventionally it is associated with some subjective idealism, which can never really be segmented as private and public.

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Women writers have actively participated in movement for their independence to make her own choices and decisions regarding her own life; It encompasses the capacity for self-determination, agency, and independent judgment, allowing women to act in their own best interests in various aspects of their lives.

Recent scholarships have played a dynamic role in revising our understanding of women's life. Autobiographical writings by women have concentrated on issues like 'voicing a female subjectivity, textuality and sexuality'. The female autobiographical writers have tried to voice the 'unsaid' aspects of their life. Their text speaks of diverse issues and experiences, unfolding a narrative of self-discovery. The concept of women's image, in Indian context are glossed with attributes like compassion, loyalty, benevolence, self-sacrifice, religious and devotion.

In the tradition of Assamese literature, the genre of autobiography, as it is understood in its modern form, is a relatively recent development. The conventional forms of biography and autobiography did not emerge in Indian literature until the late 18th century, a period significantly shaped by Indo-Persian influences. This marks a fundamental departure from the earlier prose traditions of Assamese literature, such as the *Buranjis* and *Charita Puthis*. The *Buranjis* were historical chronicles written in a prose tradition brought to Assam by the Ahom people from Yunnan, China. These documents, dating from the 16th century, served as official records of the socio-political landscape and the Ahom dynasty's history. Similarly, the *Charita Puthis* were hagiographical accounts of religious figures and saints, like the simplistic scholarly study of Srimanta Sankardeva authored by Dr. Maheshwar Neog. These pre-modern forms of life-writing were not concerned with personal introspection but with the documentation of collective history, royal lineage, or religious devotion. The individual's life was not a subject of exploration in and of itself; rather, it was a vehicle for preserving the history and values of a community or a religious movement.

It was only in Jonaki era that the Assamese biography found its firm ground in literature. It witnessed a philosophical shift from a collective, outward-looking perspective to a more personal, and introspective. It provided the essential groundwork for the emergence of modern Assamese autobiography. The genre moved from an institutional record of history to a subjective narrative of an individual's life, reflecting their experiences, emotions, and personal journey within a changing society. Lakshminath Bezbaroa's (1864–1938). autobiography, *Mur Jiwon Suworon* (My Life's Reminiscence), holds the unique distinction of being the "first autobiography of Assamese Literature". Following Bezbarua, the autobiographical form began to evolve and diversify. The early 20th century saw the emergence of other notable autobiographical works from authors like Padmanath Gohain-Barua, Benudhar Rajkhowa, and Nalini Bala Devi. This period also witnessed the blurring of genre boundaries, with memoirs and travelogues gaining prominence.

A defining characteristic of Assamese autobiography is its fusion of the personal narrative with a broader exploration of collective identity. The genre often transcends the individual self to become

a reflection of the society and communities it portrays. Authors frequently adopt an almost ethnographic role, using their personal experiences as a lens to document the lives of marginalized communities.

In the post-Independence era, Assamese autobiography underwent a profound transformation, moving from the realm of patriotic cultural documentation to a deeper, more introspective exploration of the human condition. Some of the notable autobiographies of this period was Homen Borgohain's (1932–2021), autobiographical and philosophical works which include *Atmanusandhan* (1988), and *Mur Hridoy Ekhn Zudhyokhetro* (2006). Another notable autobiography of the period is Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Adhalekha Dastabez*. Goswami, a Jnanpith Award laureate, stands as a pivotal figure who used autobiography as a radical tool for social justice. In her autobiography she narrates a powerful and unvarnished account of personal tragedy and societal hypocrisy.

Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi's autobiography *Jeevan Jeevan Bor Onupom* (2016) is not merely a chronicle of events but a powerful philosophical statement and a testament to human resilience. The book's title, which translates to "Life, Life is Incomparable and Special," provides a profound lens through which to view her journey. The deliberate reframing of a life "plagued by tragedies" as a unique and invaluable journey underscores how her personal narrative serves as the crucible for her entire body of work, making her life and literature inextricably linked. She stands as a monumental figure in 20th-century Assamese literature, a truly multidimensional persona whose contributions spanned poetry, lyric writing, academic research, and teaching. Her professional life was one of immense achievement, culminating in her being conferred the prestigious Saraswati Samman in 1987 and serving as the president of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1991, a position held by few women.

The autobiography's title is a deliberate and deeply meaningful choice, which signifies a profound philosophical stance. Her life, as she views, was not a collection of misfortunes or a victim of situational tragedy, she considers it as a singular, exceptional journey whose value is derived precisely from its unique challenges. There is a profound reaffirmation showcasing a perspective of radical acceptance and self-actualization. The narrative is precisely organized into several chapters. Each section covers a period of her life featuring social, historical and religious conditions of the time. It provides a comprehensive look at her life and times; it is a personal narrative, which reveals the surrounding social norms, values, and events that shaped the author and her world. The autobiography is significant for its portrayal of the "female position" and its pivotal place in the history of Indian women's writing. A nuanced understanding of her autobiography, however, requires an examination of the immense personal tragedies that shaped her early life. She was married as a child at the age of 11 and became a mother at 13. She was subsequently abandoned by her husband, a man 23 years her senior. This immense hardship was compounded by the death of her beloved elder brother. The immense emotional and physical trauma inflicted by these events served as a profound catalyst for her creative output. The autobiography is presented as a first-person account of these events, providing a raw and authentic narrative of survival. A deeper analysis reveals that the act of writing was not merely a form of creative expression but a restorative process. The incidents served as an output of her grief that she had forcibly repressed throughout her life. This standpoint reframes the autobiography not merely as a historical record but as a transformative and therapeutic act. The title, *Jiban, Jiban Bor Anupam*, which roughly translates to "Life, Life is Incomparable and Special," becomes a philosophical statement of triumph over adversity, a declaration that her life, despite its tragedies, is uniquely valuable and an affirmation of the "innate strength of the soul".

The autobiography is a powerful first-person narrative that chronicles a journey from a state of enforced helplessness to one of self-determination. The work details the specific "tragedies" of her early life, including being "forcefully pregnant before she could understand its meaning at the age

of thirteen/fourteen" and being "married off before puberty". The narrative arc of the book hinges on a central, transformative decision: her choice to leave Assam for Kolkata after becoming "disenchanted from everything". This geographical relocation is presented as a profound act of liberation, both physical and metaphorical. By leaving her home, she breaks free from the confines of a conservative, patriarchal society that had defined her solely by her marital and maternal status. This journey allows her to reclaim her body, her mind, and her future, transitioning from a passive victim to an active agent of her own life.

This journey is not merely a personal story of overcoming trauma; it is a political statement that demonstrates the potential for escape and rebirth in the face of seemingly insurmountable social norms. Her narrative provides a stark contrast to common portrayals of women in literature who are often confined to the domestic sphere and lack the agency to escape their circumstances. The very act of writing this autobiography is a final, definitive assertion of her subjectivity. It gives voice to her personal "micro-history narrative," a term used in the context of other pioneering Indian women's writing. In a society that seeks to make women's experiences invisible and their struggles private, Bordoloi's decision to document her life and publicize its intimate details is a profound statement of self-worth and a direct challenge to the patriarchal norms that had subjugated her. Her traumatic personal experiences are not merely biographical footnotes; they are the very source of her profound literary empathy. The explicit details of her early marriage and pregnancy serve as a direct causal link to the central themes of her work. For instance, her dedication to exploring the "predicament of a women's mind" and the hardships faced by a new bride adapting to an unfamiliar family can be seen as an authentic reflection of her own lived reality. Her writing on the pain of a woman leaving her home and the struggles within a new household are not abstract observations but deeply personal expressions from a survivor and a pioneer. This biographical context transforms her literary commentary from simple social observation into a powerful, authentic voice.

The narrative of the autobiography is meticulously structured into various chapters. These sections cover a comprehensive range of subjects, including her "childhood days, education, second world war, freedom struggle and collegiate education". This broad scope suggests that the book is not merely a personal memoir but a historical and social document that provides a comprehensive look at her life and times. It is a work noted for its "enchanted" and "juicy language" and for following her "own composing rule", which points to a unique and deeply personal literary voice. By comparing her work to other notable Assamese autobiographies, such as those by Nirupama Borgohain and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, it becomes clear that Bordoloi's work is situated within a broader tradition of influential personal narratives in Assamese literature.

Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi's legacy is that of a pioneering feminist voice. Her work paved the way for future generations of Assamese women writers, positioning her as a central figure alongside luminaries such as Nalini Bala Devi and contemporaries like Indira Goswami and Nirupama Borgohain. Her writing provided a crucial platform for exploring themes of gender and society, empowering others to follow.

Conclusion:

In synthesizing the totality of her work and life, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi emerges not just as a writer but as a visionary who saw her own life as her greatest literary work. Her autobiography, *Jeevan Jeevan Bor Onupom*, is the key that unlocks the meaning of her poetry, her songs, and her scholarly research. It reveals that her journey of struggle, perseverance, and profound humanism was the masterfully crafted narrative that informed her entire creative output. Her legacy is that of a courageous and visionary writer whose voice, born from deep personal experience and expressed with lyrical and intellectual genius, remains a vital and inspiring force in Assamese and Indian literature.

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