

## Carving a Niche for Herself

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The seminar “Gendered Urban Spaces: Narratives of Self-Possession” showed a perfect understanding of the fact that space is gendered, whether the space is rural or urban. Except for the very privileged few, women, unlike men, do not get the space that is their due on a platter. They’ve to negotiate their space through a maze of patriarchy that is often peopled by women who function as covert agents of this patriarchy. Those who wish to achieve something must carve and create a space for themselves in order to realize their full potential. Some women create this space by their creative instincts, and they could be from any walk of life. And women who wield a pen, even if ostensibly to write fiction, poetry or plays, or autobiography, manage to write their own lives. In the process of writing, they not only manage to define their space for others, they *create* their own space.

That space is gendered is now an in-the-face truth. Naturally. For space is after all the product of the dynamics of man-woman relations. It can be an embattled space, but it is nevertheless a negotiable space, whether within the domestic sphere, in the work place, or in the public arena of writers, media, the arts and politics. Women have a claim on their human rights without having to plead for it, or fight for it. Gender segregation, and gendered roles within the domestic sphere of homes, spill over to spaces outside such as the work place, temples, social events, weddings, festivities and so on. It’s a cultural conditioning that impacts on women and men alike, and makes them judgemental about what is ‘proper’ and what is not. It often leads to stereotyping women into gendered roles. There is a further shrinking of space for women when they have to negotiate their way through a maze of other women who have, (for reasons of their own), unfortunately chosen to become active agents of patriarchy. How women can – and do – salvage the situation through their political will to reclaim their full citizenship, not just in their city, but within the domestic, professional and social spheres, can be illustrated through representations in literature. I shall cite three women from a diverse cultural background, and from different points in time, who went on to not just carve a space for themselves in life, but who also gave readers a telling critique of their community and society. They are Rasha Sundari Devi from Bengal, Ani Choying Drolma who is Tibeto-Nepalese and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from Nigeria.

Writing helps a woman in not just defining her space, but equally in articulating her opposition to the gender bias in space. A woman who writes *creates* her space. Rasha Sundari Devi is a remarkable example of a woman who fought for her space and earned it through her writing at a time when women were denied

basic literacy and were not even allowed to read, let alone write. She was born around 1809 in the village of Potajia in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) into an upper caste wealthy family of landed *zamindars*. Despite her privileged background and social standing, her family had to conform to the social and cultural constraints of her times. She was therefore not sent to school because of a widely prevalent belief that a married girl who is given a formal education is fated to be widowed.

What is remarkable is the fair play in the way Rasha Sundari Debi recounts her early years as a young child- bride in her husband's home. Her mother-in-law is kind and affectionate. She never asks her to work, but gives her toys instead. She also arranges visits by other young girls of her age from the neighbouring villages, so that she can play with them. Although she was pampered, what set Rashesundari Devi apart from other girl children of her age was her deep wish to read books. She was not interested in frivolities. The death of her mother-in-law suddenly plunged her into such a heavy burden of cooking twice in a day, and for a very large family, that she found very little time to rest or even eat a full meal. Yet, despite her exhaustion, she continued to be driven by this one desire - to learn the letters of Bangla so that she could read a religious book and also learn to write. They were times when girls were not even allowed to listen to the recitation of a sacred text. At age twenty five, in a bold departure from the stern customs of her times, Rasha Sundari Debi learned to read and write on her own, without anyone to teach her even the basic letters of Bangla! She eventually gained proficiency in the language, again on her own, and went on to write her autobiography titled *Amar Jiban*. It was published in 1875 with an introduction by the distinguished literary figure Jyotindranath Tagore. Till date, it is admired as the first full scale autobiography by a Bengali woman from her times.

In Tanika Sarkar's English translation of *Amar Jiban* titled *Words to Win!* there is a memorable passage that describes how Rasha Sundari Debi once overheard her husband telling their son that he left the book *Chaitnaya Bhagwat* in the kitchen. Quickly, she stole a page that was pressed between the wooden slats of the book and hid it in the kitchen. And then, very painfully but courageously, she learnt the letters, matching them with the sounds of her son who was reciting words from what he had written on a palm leaf. Gradually, with much perseverance, she learnt to read. All this had to be done in utmost secrecy because for women, especially married women, reading amounted to committing a crime against the principles of their culture. Having learnt to read, Rashesundari moved on to the next step. She learnt to write at the first opportunity when she had some leisure at her son's home at Kanthalapota. She comments on women who conspire against each other. 'Really, how cross those old housewives would be if they saw a woman with as much as a paper in their hands!' (Sarkar, 1999:168) Having discovered the power of writing, she remarks 'How amazing! Who has made me fearless? Now I fear nothing.' (180) Thanks to her tenacious efforts, the literary world has a lucid record of her exemplary life in *Amar Jiban*.

How did Rasha Sundari Debi strike a balance between a retrograde culture and her passion for reading and writing? It was mainly through tact, patience and

perseverance, all qualities that were very essential for women from her background and her times. In Sarkar's insightful remark, 'She underlines the distance and the difference between the writing self and the written self.' (11). And in the process, Rashesundari Debi gives an intelligent critique on the gendered space for women during her times.

To take up Sarkar's point about the 'writing self' and the 'written self,' we usually read an autobiography with the implicit trust that whatever is written must have happened in the author's life in exactly the way it is narrated. Yet the very process of writing objectifies the 'self' of the writer into something slightly different from the 'self' that went through the experiences, because the past is now recalled with the esemplastic powers of her memory, her pen and of course, her valuable perspective. Once she locates herself, Rasha Sundari Debi uses the duality to write with both honesty and objectivity about her life. For instance, you can see how she goes through the motions of being a docile housewife on the one hand, and at the same time, unveil the society that kept its women chained to the drudgery of housework while denying her literacy. Only her role as a 'devoted home maker' is glorified. Writing her autobiography greatly helped her achieve a certain self-actualization in the midst of the perplexing conflicts in her life.

This brings us to an interesting aspect of an autobiography. It is a genre of writing that occupies a sensitive area between the private and the public and works on a curious paradox. Written obviously to be read by the public, you find the author sharing things that she considers "private" and therefore does not share with the people around her! One *writes* about something that one hesitates to *speak* about. Sample the way Rasha Sundari critiques her society for imposing certain unstated and ridiculous conditions on women eating their food. For instance, a woman is first of all, not supposed to enjoy eating the food that she has cooked so diligently! 'It would have been most shameful to refer to my eating in public,' she remarks (166).

In fact, Sarkar has an entire chapter titled "Food and Eating in a Woman's Life". She remarks that while a woman is expected to cook a large, elaborate meal for her family, as a nurturer she is also expected to selflessly give up her food for others, if need be. Much value is given to guests, even if some of them arrive unexpectedly. There was a tradition of serving meals to these guests, and as a consequence, nothing much may be left for the women (who cooked the meal) to eat. *Amar Jiban* establishes this very strange, if illogical, relationship between a woman and the food that she has to cook and serve her family and visiting relatives and friends. Perhaps this has a parallel in most Indian cultures. It certainly has in Tamil Nadu where women for long had to uncomplainingly eat the leftovers after serving their family, and visiting guests. There were instances where the women did not even have some leftovers and had to go hungry.

Since women were not even allowed to go beyond this drudgery to learn, read or write, Rasha Sundari Debi frequently refers to herself as a caged bird and a "tamed bird". However, after reading this bold personal narrative, one recalls Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the*

*Caged Bird Sings*. If Rashsundari was denied education because she was a girl, Marguerite in Angelou's book was denied respect and even visibility because she is Black.

Rasha Sundari Debi has the wisdom that comes with a thorough understanding of her times, her society, and her place in it as a woman. Likewise, Sally Morgan in *My Place* understands her cultural roots as an aboriginal descending from the Palku people of Pibara in her hometown Perth, in Western Australia.

Ani Choying Drolma is another woman who defined her space clearly by writing about her life in her book *Singing for Freedom* that records her life as much as it critiques the gender bias in her community. Gifted with a melodious voice, she evolves as a singer of international standing who eventually invests all her earnings from her performances in founding her Arya Tara School for young Buddhist nuns, an institution that sought to liberate many a young girl from the Himalayas. Drolma realized early that only a formal education can empower girls from the weaker, vulnerable sections of society. 'My voice is my tool. I'm engaged in a struggle against the poverty and ignorance that force some Buddhist girls in Nepal and Tibet to become nuns in order to escape a life of hell. They become nuns so that they won't be turned into domestic slaves – so they won't have to marry a brutish man who will beat his wife and make her work like a donkey. ...At the age of ten I decided I would never marry and no one would ever raise a hand to me again – starting with my father.' (2009, 2)

Ani Choying Drolma, a Tibeto-Nepalese, is born into poverty in Kathmandu. She was called 'Pomo' which simply means 'daughter' in Tibetan. Her family had no means to educate her. She lived her early years like the rest of the girls in the poor neighbourhood, as domestic slaves, cleaning utensils on the roadside, washing clothes, cooking, tending to younger siblings, getting beaten regularly for not working enough, in short doing everything that was expected of women and girls around that time. Drolma saw that within her community beating women and girls, giving her a life of hard menial labour, and abusing her if found at fault, was all considered a "normal" way of life. Nobody protested, not women, certainly not men. 'Almost every day my father finds a good reason to beat me...He hits me with all his might, never holding back, not caring whether he injures me, as though he wants to use all his strength to reduce me to nothing.' (13-14)

Patriarchy rules. It gets under the skin of men and women alike. John McLeod defined patriarchy as a system 'which invests power in men and marginalises women'. (2000, 173). He states that patriarchy is like colonialism. 'It asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as "normal" or "true".' (174) The habitual repeats of these 'systems' then slowly begin to masquerade as custom/tradition/ or norm. He cites Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford's phrase, "a double colonisation" for the analogy between patriarchy and colonisation in their book *A Double Colonisation: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (1986) and observes that women 'have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy.' (175) Very early on, Kate Millet had declared famously that "Power is the essence of

politics" in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970, 25). The personal has to become political, if it was to be heard at all.

Even as a small girl, Drolma had a vigilant mind that made her question the gross injustice meted out to girls and women. Unlike other girls who passively took their misery as their lot for having born female, Drolma had healthy thoughts and a strong mind that helped her take a firm stand in a striking departure from the women around her. Determined that she would not fall in line with the rest of the girls, she set out to create a different life for herself with her efforts. 'I never hated, underestimated or misjudged myself. I never told myself that I deserved the things that happened to me; I never turned all that rage against myself. Never. But I did develop a degree of hardness...But a part of me died during those years.' (23-24). In this, she was greatly helped by her uncommon gift which is her spiritual quest. Drolma decided to join a Buddhist monastery and soon became an ordained nun. In both her public appearances, and in her book, Drolma pointedly mentions that nobody can beat a nun, because it is considered a sin.

In the monastery, her teacher, the Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, cuts a lock of her hair. 'I bend my head towards him and see the little hairs gently twirl before they come to rest on the rug, invisible among its patterns. "You are now called Ani Choying Drolma."' declares the Rinpoche. (48) With that, the old 'Pomo' who washed utensils and was beaten brutally by her father is gone. Looking back on the pattern of her life with a Buddhist insight into what leads to what, she remarks: 'Two men counted in my life, and made me what I am: my father because he beat me and my Buddhist teacher because he loved me.'(2) She realises the ironical twist in her life. But for the severe beating she got from her father, and the beating of women and girls she saw all around her, she would not have joined a monastery. Sometimes, or very often, we've a lot to thank our misfortune for. It helps us make the next bold move to change and transform our lives. The Buddhist monastery indeed opens a new path for Drolma in life.

Growing up in the monastery further sharpens her introspective bent of mind. She listens to her inner voice unflinchingly, just as she listens to the signals from her body and her mind. Says Drolma: 'Deep inside me, like the molten lava in the centre of the Earth, is a core of indestructible molecules, a ball of power and energy of rare density. It's that which drives me and guides me. Today this core of brute will is my most treasured ally.'(3)

The next shocking truth that she notices is the gendered space, even within the spiritual atmosphere of the monastery. Buddhist monasteries go by their own hierarchy in which monks (the male renunciants) are given an unequivocally higher status than nuns (the female renunciants). Drolma is well aware of this inequality, but she prefers the isolation and dignity of being a Buddhist nun that earns for her the respect of her community, to what she was in the past. Endowed with a lovely mellifluous voice, Drolma learns to sing, and works very hard on her talent to eventually evolve as an international singer, sought after for concerts across the globe. When she earns a lot of money, her thoughts turn to the girls in her community, poor, illiterate, beaten, and made to work hard. She decides to

invest her money in a school that would offer a proper formal education to young Buddhist nuns. Founded by Drolma, the Arya Tara School fanned out in giving a new lease of life to many young girls in the Himalayas. When Drolma buys a black Suzuki jeep, she remarks that it is 'small and strong like me,' (124) and adds, 'At last I feel I'm in the driving seat of my own life.' (125) Towards the end of her book, we find her thinking of her next investment, a hospital.

From the beginning and all through her life, Drolma is steadfast in her goals, which is why she could carve a firm, inviolable space for herself. Her innate wisdom takes her far. Nothing tempts her on the way. Not the offer of marriage, or the promise of love. She takes her pretty looks in her stride, with a rare maturity and self-directed humour. When her mother sends a letter to a young man through her, she knows it is a clever ruse to get her married. Drolma writes: 'I had no desire to meet up with this man, still less to go along with a hypocritical game of seduction. Of course it's nice to be thought attractive, but my ego is content with a bit of silent admiration. The love between a man and a woman is absolutely not on my list of priorities. I enjoy seeing love in the cinema, but I don't want it in real life. And now, a time when I can at last start enjoying my freedom and exploring the world, is definitely not the moment to saddle myself with a man, whose permission I've to ask for everything and to whom I would have to be accountable. The very idea seems absurd to me.' (2009, 144)

She shares with the reader the Buddhist way of dealing with an enemy. 'Buddhist practice teaches us to regard our enemy as a teacher, to make use of people who provoke us in order to combat our own negativity. ..If I hadn't been beaten, I would never have come into contact with my teacher, and I would have none of the qualities that I have managed to develop to be a good human being. I believe that trials make you a better person.' (213). She seeks the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for her school. When she gets an audience, His holiness, not surprisingly, tells her that it isn't enough to just teach the nuns to pray. 'You must teach them to read and write, and also how to speak English'. From an abusive childhood, Drolma emerges as a strong woman whose life is expansive, not the least because of the valuable teachings of Buddhism. 'We are the architects of our own happiness,' she writes. 'We can't stop bad or annoying things from happening, but we can choose how to look at them.' (108)

The urban space begs to be defined. Along with the question of space, there is this thing called 'place' that is juxtaposed to space. Urban space and place could be anywhere in any of the metropolis within the country or abroad. Terms such as cosmopolitan, expatriate, diaspora or exile is not just a part of an environmentalist's rhetoric or an eco-critical discourse. They are actual conditions or situations that baffle people with their fast-changing complexity. Here, race, culture and class have big roles to play. To be perceived as culturally distinct in a vast urban setting that ostensibly looks neutral is fraught with risks and incomprehension, even as it gives women/men their individuality. Lest we forget, this individual in turn, takes her /his place amidst other individuals within the hybridity of an urban scenario. The cultural identity of an individual

in an urban setting – given its cultural diversity - is given ‘an epistemic status’ by Satya P. Mohanty when he writes about “Identity, Multiculturalism, Justice” (1998, 203).

Any talk of urban space in the contemporary scenario has to factor in globalization. Ursula K. Heise, another articulate voice on urban space, separates the two main concepts that play a central role in globalization theories – cosmopolitanism and deterritorialization. (2011: 157) Cultural identity against a globalized setting is addressed again perceptively by Arjun Appadurai in his article “Disjuncture and Difference”: ‘The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization.’ (2011: 28) He proposes an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures, all of which have a suffix of “-scapes” to point the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes. (a) ethnoscaples, (b) mediascaples, (c) technoscaples, (d) financescaples, (e) ideascaples. He says ‘These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*) can be called imagined worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe.’ (29). Appadurai believes that ‘Deterritorialization, in general, is one of the central forces of the modern world. It creates global fundamentalisms because it creates exaggerated and intensified attachment to politics in the home state.’ (33.) One can see examples of extremism in people who have relocated in other countries, as easily as one can see them within the country.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiechie, the Nigerian writer, confronts the gendered space in an international setting head on, in her book *Americanah*. The main protagonist is young Ifemelu from Nigeria, intelligent, educated and beautiful, who sets off to the US to study. Some years down the line, she recalls her own first reaction to America with a wry humour. She writes home to her friend Obinze ‘The best thing about America is that it gives you space. I like that. I like that you buy into a dream, it’s a lie but you buy into it and that’s all that matters.’ (2013: 434) But very soon, a larger truth hits her. She has to find her identity, or worse, define that identity. Within the immense cultural diversity of the US, she attends the ASA meetings (African Students’ Association) at the basement of Wharton Hall where the Tanzanian Mwombeki talks to a group of Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Zimbabweans and Congolese. They are all advised to regularly attend ASA meetings and to remain friends with fellow Africans. Mwombeki voices some unsettling truth: ‘You will also find that you might make friends easily with other internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans, both black and white.’ (140)

It’s all very well to talk about one’s space, national identity, cultural identity and so on in intellectual discussions against a global setting like the international community of students, teachers, and professionals. But finding that ‘space’ is a personal battle within the large, diffuse cultural diversity of a place. Ifemelu evolves as a well-known blogger. She writes to make things clear for herself, and for others. The blog is – and is not – her space. Because she discovers that as a blogger she is required to give opinions. Soon enough, gender catches up with

Ifemelu. For instance, being an African woman entails a constant struggle with her hair. The hair has to “look right” and “proper” for her to be accepted in the US. Hair is a “Race Metaphor” in America. ‘White Girlfriend and I are Michelle Obama groupies. So the other day I say to her – I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says – you mean her hair doesn’t grow like that?’ (296) Even for the first lady Michelle Obama, (or because she is the first lady) her hair has to be politically correct. Says Ifemelu with a biting sarcasm: ‘Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls...She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democratic vote.’ (297)

Adichie goes on to describe how women torture themselves to straighten their hair in order to be accepted. Citing the “Before” and “After” in the makeover pictures on the TV, she describes the black woman who has a natural hair, kinky or curly in the “Before” picture, and in the pretty “After” picture, ‘somebody’s taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight’. (297) She declared defiantly: ‘I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it’s not political...Afro is not costume, for God’s sake.’ (297) Her exasperation is understandable.

Ifemelu’s blog has a wide reach. She gets invited for talks on cultural diversity when she addresses the way the US lumps all blacks into one homogenized whole. She questions the position taken by the US regarding Africans and writes about the irrelevance of a national identity so long as you’re in America: ‘Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican, I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You’re in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes...you know black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder.’ (220) In another titled “Understanding America,” she writes: ‘Sometimes they say “culture” when they mean race...When they say “urban” it means black and poor and possibly dangerous and potentially exciting.’ (351)

And what happens to the Nigerian identity when he/she returns home from the US? America-returned Nigerians meet at the Nigeropolitan Club, ‘chic people...their voices blurred with foreign accents. You can’t find a decent smoothie in this city! Oh my God, were you at that conference? What this country needs is an active civil society’. And then they talk about hair again ‘as though it were an alien eruption.’ (407)

In each of the three women, Rasha Sundari Debi, Ani Choying Drolma and Chimamanda Adichie, we see how a woman carves her own space through grit, a strong political will and a stand-alone spirit. She reclaims for herself the human rights that are her legitimate due, and creates her full citizenship in her community, her workspace, her country and in the world. The very act of writing seems to have effectively helped them critique the gendered space of their society and community.



And yet, writing for a woman is not without its contrary moments and situations. A writer who is a woman cannot take her space for granted, as a 'given'. It is fraught with complexities of gender and her works are often essentialised by both the so-called "mainstream" literary establishment and the feminist fraternity. The evaluation of a literary work by a woman is yet to come of age. It overlooks aspects of her work that strive for a larger range, a wider horizon, the quality of her language, her style, and the new techniques she may have adopted. All of them are usually swept aside in favour of picking on the more obvious and routine issues of women by the gatekeepers of literature. There is not enough receptivity and openness to absorb the new reality in the works by contemporary women, because this new reality shows changes not only in women, but in men as well. However, this reality is not quite permitted to register as it does not conform to the comfortable tenets of standard, text-book feminism.

We have to free ourselves of the stereotypes of conventional feminism, if we want to absorb the new politics of truth that could empower women, both in the creative and critical fields of activity. Not surprisingly, feminism also becomes hegemony of a certain kind. Let us go back to the seventies to recall what Michael Foucault termed as the "politics of truth." Said Foucault: 'It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power, but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economical and cultural within which it operates at the present time.' (1980).

A woman writes within a circumscribed space in which a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes are at work. (Kannan, 2001, End Notes). One recalls the relevance of what Ellen Moers said more than three decades back: 'Subsuming the female into the category of the human was a political act.' (Moers: 1976) This political act will continue to challenge women. But it will also help them grow tall. And it will definitely make them stretch to their full potential, as it did, for the three women featured in this article.

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