



Class and Gender Complexities in Baby Halder's Autobiography *Aalo Aandhari* (Translated in English as *A Life Less Ordinary* by Urvashi Butalia)

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Abstract

Indian women facing class, caste, and gender distinction have been represented in Indian writing in English but the subaltern peasant women, domestic maids, tribal women in particular have not been able to find representation either in history or in the texts of Indian writing in English. Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*, an autobiographical account by a domestic worker in Gurgaon, is a spokesperson to the voice of millions of poor domestic women workers living in abusive and violent relationships, working hard for little wages struggling with the oppressive forces of gender and class.

The aim of the researcher is to explore the complexities of class and gender of a poor domestic worker, Baby Halder in her autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary*. The issues discussed here are largely shared by Dalit women, in general. The writer has tried to depict the representations of her 'self' and her conflicts with the dominant social and cultural narratives in India that marginalize Dalits and particularly make the lives of Dalit women difficult. She has also focussed on the assertion of her rights and relates how ultimately she crossed boundaries to fulfill her ambition and make her life story known to people.

Key words: subaltern, representation, complexities, marginalized

Autobiography is a form of self-revelation in which the author consciously or unconsciously portrays herself/himself and is a powerful medium for the writers to relate their first-hand experiences and it is particularly important for the subaltern writers who need a platform for self-expression in order to assert their identities. Baby Halder, an Indian domestic servant turned author who has written her autobiography entitled *A Life Less Ordinary* originally in Bangla tells the tale of a woman searching the meaning of life. It is the journey of a woman who leaves her familiar, though cruel, surroundings not for any adventure but in search of an ordinary life and who ends up achieving something quite extraordinary after overcoming the crisis by walking out of a horrible marriage with three children. The story is about her indomitable spirit and her choice to resist the social set up where women from the lower strata are viewed only as objects of patriarchal domination.

A Life Less Ordinary was originally published in 2002 in Bangla in Baby Halder's mother tongue, titled as *Aalo Andhari*. The Bangla title literally means "Darkness and Light." Baby's self-narrative differs from such mainstream autobiographies as it is a self-narrative of a subaltern, whose life is commonplace, and who lacks the agency to speak for herself. So, Halder's writing is 'autobiography from below'. Baby Halder undergoes suffering and torture at the hands of various agents of violence in Indian society. By writing her autobiography, Baby has attained empowerment and lives with a new identity, with recognition in the Indian literary circle. As Manjeet Rathee observes, "Baby Halder's *Aalo Aandhari* (Light and Darkness/*A Life Less Ordinary*) is a powerful reflection on the class and gender concerns from the subaltern point of view."

Halder primarily hails from Murshidabad, West Bengal where her childhood days, as described in her autobiography, were happy. She was born in Kashmir and spent her childhood days in Jammu and Kashmir and later at Darjeeling. Her father, whom she calls *Baba*, worked in the state of Jammu and Kashmir but he moved his family to his native, Murshidabad, when Baby was just four years and that was the beginning of the troubles not only for Baby Halder but for the whole family. Her father didn't have his own house, so they had to live with his elder brother's family. He would send them money at intervals and that too only a minimal amount which was insufficient to make their ends meet. Moreover, he was a habitual drinker. Ultimately, Baby's mother found it difficult to face three major obstacles, absence of her husband, insufficient supply of funds to run the household and a drunkard husband. Unable to deal with these issues, her mother left the house and her children, except her youngest baby son whom she took along. Her father searched for her but could not track her down and frustrated with his wife's disappearance, he married again.

Baby Halder's life had come to a tragic end at the age of four with her mother's disappearance and his father's remarriage. Her step mother was a woman because of whom Baby's life became merely a series of unfortunate events, one after the other. Baby's parents, especially her mother, was in favour of education and sent her to school but after remarriage, her father became insensitive and constantly abused and beat her for inconsequential reasons. Baby tells a school friend that there was no food in the house and her father beat her for this crime. She was forced to drop out of school and work at home. However, to cut down the

number of hungry mouths to feed at home, she was sent off in marriage at the age of twelve, her would-be husband being twice her age. This was the time for her to go to school and play, not to enter the world of maturity. For Baby the institution of marriage only meant that she would at least get to have a feast. She was singing, jumping and playing even in the hours before her wedding. It was only after her marriage that she confronted the ugly reality of child marriage. Becoming a mother at the age of thirteen and giving birth to three children one after the other, within a short span of time weakened and exhausted her physically as well as mentally. Not only this, her husband, Shankar assaulted her many times. At one time when he found her talking to another man, he split her head open hitting her with a stone in anger and jealousy and on yet another occasion; he dragged her by her hair.

A number of bitter incidents heightened Baby's sense of insecurity with her husband. Baby's elder sister, Rani was asphyxiated by her husband. Next, her neighbour was burnt to death by her alcoholic husband her only fault being that she was caught watching television in somebody else's house. In another incident Baby's husband warned her against visiting a neighbour in particular the reason being that her neighbour was estranged from her husband. Distressed by these heart-breaking incidents, Baby lost trust in men, particularly in her husband and was secretly determined to leave him. Finding a suitable opportunity, Baby took her destiny into her own hands and travelled to Faridabad to her older brother. She was both uneducated and belonged to the lower caste therefore she could find employment only as domestic help. However, her misfortune followed her here to make her life miserable. Her employers most often treated her badly, tried to take advantage of her poverty, and all the time overburdened her with work without any extra payment. Domestic help falls under unorganised sector and therefore, domestic workers constantly face exploitation. In Baby's words, one of her employers treated her less than a dog since the pet dog of the employer gave her more respect than the employer herself.

When Baby Halder began writing she was a domestic worker employed by Prabodh Kumar Srivastava, the grandson of the renowned Hindi novelist and short story writer Munshi Premchand living at Gurgaon. who sensed Baby's interest in books, gave her books to read and improved her education. He also helped her reclaim her sense of self, alter her self-image and live with dignity and self-respect. seeing her interest in books while dusting his book shelves, encouraged her to first reading authors like Taslima Nasreen whose autobiographical work *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) is about a deep anger on being born a woman in a poor society turned out to be a turning point to inspire her own memories. Before going on a trip to South India, he bought her a notebook and pen and encouraged her to write her life story. She began writing late at night after work and sometimes in between chores in her native language Bengali and by the time he was back she had already written hundred pages

A Life Less Ordinary narrates the life of Baby Halder in minute detail and brings to life the major events in Baby's life, especially underscoring the difficulties of living, beginning for her at an early age of four after her mother abandoned her along with her other siblings. Baby shows unsettled emotions at her mother's act of disappearance. She quietly leaves for the market one day, and never returns since she was exhausted by the conditions of her life.. In Baby's opinion it was cowardly for her mother to suddenly vanish one day, leaving behind three small children whose responsibility she shared with her husband. So

she feels that her mother proved to be extremely selfish in avoiding her responsibility. History repeated itself when Baby too like her mother, exhausted and disgruntled with the adverse conditions in her life as a result of her husband's cruelty and jealousy decided to walk out on her marriage and shun the repressive patriarchy. Ultimately she ran away and boarded a train to Delhi. However, Baby unlike her mother did not abandon her children; she took them along with her; she took care of them, made sacrifices for them, and finally helped them settle in life. That was despite the fact that more often than not, as a domestic help she was expected to meet her employers' all demands, leaving with her no time to take a proper care of her own children.

After her mother's disappearance, Baby's schooling discontinued. There was no money for school fees and other related expenditure; her stepmother was least interested in her education and more interested in her doing the chores at home. Life at home was in chaos. In attempt to minimize the burden of hungry mouths to be fed at home, her father executed his plans to marry his children off as early as possible. Her elder sister, Rani was abruptly married off because he could no longer afford to keep her at home. Soon after Baby was packed off with an elderly man who was more than double her age, the marriage turned out to be a fiasco as her husband was jealous and inhuman. Baby had to put an end to her marriage to live a saner life. Consequently, she ended up in Gurgaon area, looking for work, like many other desperate women trying to find an opportunity to be financially independent.

A Life Less Ordinary, narrates the life-story of an individual. The story appeals to intellectuals interested in women's emancipation and reawakening and has universal appeal concerning several significant issues in women's lives, especially in the Indian context, this is not the story of just one woman but of common Indian women. The other aspect of the work, which may not be shared by all Indian women universally, is the story of a Dalit woman, shared by a large number of Indian Dalit women. Thus, Baby Halder's autobiography *A Life Less Ordinary* is not only a testimony to the hardships she has undergone all her life being a woman, but also a source of inspiration to other women facing similar circumstances. It reveals not just Baby's battle against poverty and gender discrimination but her incessant struggle to overcome the image of repressed woman, the universal (appealing to all women's issues in Indian context) and the particular (appealing to marginalized, Dalit women's issues)

Inequality on the basis of gender takes various shapes with sexual harassment, unequal remuneration for ladies who do the same work as men and so on. Though the Indian constitution guarantees equal rights of living to both men and women yet the anti woman mind set in society has diminished their possibilities to flourish in society. Due to gender disparity, the rate of poverty and unemployment for women remains common in the Indian society. The narrative in *A Life Less Ordinary* brings to the forefront one of the most pertinent issues plaguing women in India i.e. patriarchal subjugation. Patriarchal subjugation is the condition of women being governed by the male members of the family, community and the nation at large (Becker). All women in India irrespective of their caste, class or social status are destined to the same fate. A few noteworthy incidents from Baby's life exemplify patriarchal subjugation affecting her life. For

instance, Baby's mother leaves her husband because he wanted to dominate her and even would not provide for the family. He wanted to run his household on patriarchal rules, as he desired. Thus Baby's mother was not a woman to live a repressed life and never ready to make compromise with her freedom. The act of her disappearance from home was an indirect challenge to patriarchal authority. Baby's husband, Shankar, also treated her like his slave. He dictated the rules for her social behaviour: she should not talk to other men; she could not visit the woman in her neighbourhood because the woman was estranged from her husband, and so on. Defiance of repression and subjugation was often dealt with in an extremely violent manner. Baby's husband hit her with a stone as he caught her talking to a stranger. Baby's older sister was killed by her husband for the similar reasons, that is, for her defiance of patriarchy. In a similar incident, a man in Baby's neighbourhood burnt his wife alive because she could not tolerate her watching TV in someone else's house. The men since they were men and the victims were women lived with the idea that they had the authority to control the behavior of their wives; that their wives needed their permission for anything they wanted to do; and these men were consciously or subconsciously aware that the general ideology of the family, the community and the country at large supported their belief in superiority of men over women. These men display extreme anxiety around their women, so, they wish to control their movements and their social interaction extreme restrictions on women become the primary objective of such men. Their women have to either completely surrender to the whims and fancies of their men or face dire consequences.

Baby Halder's autobiography, by narrating the crimes committed by male members of a family against women in their families serves as a testimony to the harsh situation of so many women who suffer such crimes on a daily basis, most often silently, not even sharing their woes and voices with their close relations, and therefore their stories remain unheard, and undocumented. Several women face such a predicament because their families and the society in general expect from them to conform to the archaic roles founded on patriarchal social structure which forces them to subjugate themselves to the authority of men whether they like it or not.

The narrative in *A Life Less Ordinary* is significant to understand the cultural mechanism of male control over females especially in Indian context by inculcating the feeling among women that female body is not her own, but owned by her family, community and even her nation. Her intelligence is undervalued and she is made to believe that women don't know what is best for them, that men are much smarter than women, and finally, that women are weaker than men and therefore, need control by men. By controlling women's bodies men restrict women's sexuality and reproductive behaviour. An unmarried girl is controlled by her male kins while a married woman by her husband and his family members. Thus, it is a girl's father and brothers who control her sexuality. For instance, in traditional societies girls are forbidden to indulge in love affairs or to have sex and follow certain dress codes. The patriarchal social norms provide the husband enough grounds to enact the control. In *A Life Less Ordinary*, Baby's husband controls her by disallowing her to talk to strangers, mix with neighbors, and restricting her movements within the community. Baby also recounts an instance when she came very close to loving another man. The man, named in the narrative as Dulal, genuinely cared for her as well as her children. Her feelings for the man who was her childhood friend, as she describes, were like that of a lover. Dulal's illiteracy discouraged her in moving forward in

love since Dulal didn't know reading and writing, so, she could never write or communicate her feelings to him. However, Baby was also aware of her predicament, and the right her husband had over her body and feelings which was a hindrance in the path of women's emancipation.

A Life Less Ordinary is replete with instances where women are regularly subjected to physical and sexual violence. Baby herself was married off at the tender age of twelve, and quite naturally, she had to face sexual violence, amounting to rape, from her husband who was a mature man, fourteen years senior to her. Her elder sister, Rani, had the same story to tell. Later on, she was murdered by her husband. Baby was assaulted by her husband, Shankar, for petty incidents like talking to another man or talking to her neighbor. Violence against women, including sexual, mental and physical violence and abuse are rampant around the world but the violence seems to be very common in India. It is not just the violence that is the major concern here; it is more the denigration of an individual because of her gender or sex that is the cause of worry. Baby's husband, Shankar, harasses her since he feels superior to her after committing atrocities. He simply works on his instincts that are culturally inculcated in him since childhood that men are superior to women in social hierarchy.

Domestic violence is also a common phenomenon in the lives of Indian women who would identify their cases with Baby's story. It's highly commendable for Baby that she survived the torture from her husband and made her story public. Kalokhe reports from their survey that at least 41% of women reported experiencing domestic violence during their lifetime. One of the major causes for the high domestic violence in India, as reported in some studies is the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure of Indian society that gives men an upper hand in man-woman relationship. The cultural norms of the country obviously propagate the notion that women are lower than men in social status, and therefore, they are to lead a life of subordination to men (Fernandez, 1997; Gundappa& Rathod, 2012).

The objectification of a woman is the act of a man looking at a woman as merely a sex object. The act devalues the woman since the man does not recognize the valuable qualities of the woman denying the woman a human status who possesses intellectual faculties, physical capabilities or emotions. Baby's husband, Shankar, at the age of twenty-four married a girl of twelve and had sex with her since she became a mother at the age of fourteen. He could neither visualize what emotions she may have when being forced into the act, nor feel her pain and trauma because to him she was merely a body for the purpose of sexual gratification.

Another significant aspect of gender complexities depicted in *A Life Less Ordinary*, closely related to objectification of and violence against women, is the culture of victim-shaming of women. Victim-shaming is the act of blaming the victim of sexual harassment, in all the cases women, for the crime committed against them by men, pointing out the lack of conformity in their behaviour, clothing, life-style, and other character traits. Thus, it is quite common, especially in Indian contexts, to blame a rape victim for the attack to attract the attacker by putting on 'revealing dress,' 'walking alone, or 'being too open with men etc. Victim-shaming makes it easier for men to achieve the control sought upon women through their bodies. The major women characters in Baby's autobiography face restrictions imposed upon their

movements, socialization, work and it appears that the primary aim of their men is to rule the lives of their women.

Baby's narrative highlights the issue of women's economic slavery that is also an issue which is also shared widely by Indian women in general. Women in India, irrespective of their class and caste status, have the least control in the economic affairs of their families and depend upon their husbands for their personal expenditure, even if they are working women which is a hurdle in women's empowerment. Only a drastically radical decision on the part of women has the power to change their status, like, for instance, Baby Halder leaves her husband to reach a destination unknown to her and face untold challenges. However, Baby takes her destiny into her own hands and her grit and determination pays off, her decisions work for her and she is eventually free from the slavery of her husband.

Baby Halder was an ordinary woman- one who would have spent her life like any ordinary marginalized woman would do, until she recognized her potential to write about herself, taking life changing decisions. Her victory lay in her exploring her ability to read and write which she had always desired. She's a feminist in the sense that she shows courage, takes up responsibility of her children, proves self-worth and is always optimistic and inspires women to be mentally prepared to face the challenges within a male oriented world refusing to being shackled or weighed down by the patriarchal system and maintaining independence in her thought and action.

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