

Gayatri Devi - 'A Princess Remembers': The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur

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Abstract

In *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, Gayatri Devi narrates her life story and allows her readers to get glimpses of her life of excess and extravagance, how she was raised in a lavish palace which staffed over 500 servants, and shot her first panther when she was just twelve.

This book provides an incisive look into the extraordinary life of one of the world's most fascinating women and an informal history of the princely states of India. Her life story is a blend of courage, romance, devotion, losses and elegance. It also depicts the condition of women in royal class. There is dichotomy in higher class women's position, where women

were victims of polygamy, veil system and other evil customs of society. It also presents the seeds of Marxism, the polarity of class in Indian society. On the one hand, there are aristocrats, leading a life of luxury; on the other hand there are poor who can't survive.

Keywords – Extravagance, Feminine Psyche, Courage, Victim, Polygamy, Evil Customs.

I. Introduction

The autobiography is a well recorded graph of the author's mental, emotional and cultural growth as an individual. The author highlights the men and women around her and socio-political context of her time. Seeing many poor villagers in Darjeeling she felt immense compassion. She never expressed, as a young princess, any kind of indifference and repulsion for the poor. This is a good quality of her noble-heart, suitable to a maiden of high birth. She writes: I loved to walk in Darjeeling, watching the village people and -getting into conversation with them, though I was saddened by their poverty and the miserable, torn and patched clothes their children wore. Autobiography is a well recorded graph of the author's mental, emotional and cultural growth as an individual. The events of her 'sport-mad' nature, her sentimental attraction for the elephants, her skill as a hunter in childhood, her colorful years of courtship, her anxiety about Jai's plane crash, her joy in marriage with Jai, her bridal anxiety for her suitability in Jaipur palace, her acceptance of the traditional 'purdah' in Jaipur palace as a sort of an adjustment, her happy married life with Maharaja of Jaipur—all provide the details of her subjective view of her own personality as well as self-analysis. In the book, Gayatri Devi writes about her carefree tomboy childhood, her courtship with the Maharaja of Jaipur, and her marriage and experiences living in the City Palace of Jaipur. She re-iterates about how she had to adjust to the new customs and traditions and life with the Maharaja's other two wives.

II. Gayatri Devi - 'A Princess remembers' : The memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur

Women's autobiography is a genre that, offers epistemological force to feminist theory, though not in a predictable way. Feminist works on personal narratives argue for the centrality of women's experiences and women's autobiographic in the construction of gendered subjectivity.

Rajmata Gayatri Devi was the last of the Queens of Jaipur in Rajasthan. Gayatri Devi was the daughter of Maharaja Jitendra Narayan and Maharani Indira Devi of the "Koch" dynasty of Cooch Behar. She was born on the 23rd May 1919. After schooling in India she finished her education in Switzerland and London. At the age of 19 she fell in love with Man Singh, the heir to the Jaipur throne. Their marriage was initially opposed by her parents, as Man Singh already had two wives, the daughters of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. However, her parents gave in to her determination, and she was married to Man Singh in 1939.

In *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, Gayatri Devi narrates her life story and allows her readers to get glimpses of her life of excess and extravagance, how she was raised in a lavish palace which staffed over 500 servants, and shot her first panther when she was just twelve. The conventional narrative technique of- the chronological order of narration of events is followed. The events in the author's life are chronologically told—first, the ancestry, her birth, childhood, education, love for Jai, difficulties in the love affair, the success in love followed by marriage with Jai, the political conditions, change in the British Rule, Independence, the merger of the State and loss of royal status, her present day simple lonely life of a commoner in Jaipur till the writing of the book. Broadly speaking, the book deals with the period from 1919 to 1976 in the author's life. The glorious role of Maharani is the standpoint of Gayatri Devi in the book. This role is definitely her social position and royal status. It compels her to select the events for her book, and

decide the content patterns and the scope of presentation of the 'self'. It is a proper standpoint for two reasons: one, it is the very mature stage of her life, and another, she is absorbed in her lost glory as a Maharani even today. She dwells mentally in the remote glorious Jaipur State. Gayatri Devi narrates the facts of her life as the Maharani of Jaipur and the social context of her living. She narrates the truth about the two sides. She tells the truth about the contemporary life of Indian Princes, their manners, the marriage system, the family system, the purdah system, the education of the princess, the progressive views on women education, marriage and divorce etc. in the Baroda State, the rigidity of caste-system, Gandhian efforts to uplift untouchables etc. Thus the author sincerely tries to tell truth about herself, her society and the contemporary life. The entire narration is candid. She tells frankly her sensitive and tender feelings of love for Jai, in its infancy. She is faithful in expressing these feelings without shyness though they were strange, immature and in the form of a reverie. There is more subjectivity.

Gayatri Devi was born in London, UK on 23rd May 1919. She was the princess of Cooch Behar in West Bengal. Her father was the king of Cooch Behar of Koch Rajbongshi dynasty while her mother was a Maratha princess of Gaekwad dynasty.

She studied at Glendower Preparatory School London and Vishvabharti University at West Bengal. During a visit to her parents, she met her husband Sawai Maan Singh II of Jaipur at the age of 12. He was 21 years old. When she was 19, they decided to get married and it was a love marriage at that time. Despite age differences, they maintained a happy married life. She was included in Vogue magazine as one of the most beautiful women in the world. She was warned that being third wife of the king will not be easy and she was often under scrutiny by others, yet she carried all her duties with charm and grace while being a changemaker.

During freedom struggle, Gayatri Devi always supported Congress. Her husband decided to merge Jaipur in India during partition. After independence of India, Gayatri Devi contested Indian Parliamentary elections in 1962 and won with record breaking 192,909 votes creating a record. Leaders like John F Kennedy appreciated her landslide victory “The woman with staggering majority anyone has ever earned in an election”. She won thrice on the same seat.

Her popularity among the masses and accessibility to problem solving of the common people made her a favourite of people. She lost her privy purses during the tenure of PM Indira Gandhi, but she continued to do social work. She started a school for children in Jaipur after her name. She was arrested in 1971 emergency period and served 5 months in Tihar Jail. She left politics after it but advocated human rights for prisoners living in adverse conditions. Although she lost her princely powers, she did not lose her strength. She got ill during her jail time and her husband expired which gave her trauma but she fought back and remained an inspiration for women of Rajasthan. She was one of the queens who never practiced purdah. She empowered women and funded many programmes for poor and children. She was also a brilliant polo player. She was also called “People’s princess” because she was reachable. Her initiative includes Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls school with 40 students and one English teacher which later became one of the best in the country. She benefitted more than 30000+ girls and women through her educational initiatives. When she came out of jail she wrote an autobiography “The Princess Remembers“. She was given the title of “Raj mata” after her husband’s demise.

From her choice of attire to her political decisions, she was often praised and criticised at the same time. She was a symbol of India’s royal past and a better future as she defied conventional rules and maintained her duties as a Queen of her people, ensuring their welfare. Her last days were spent over property disputes of her grandchildren but she refused

to comment on that in public. She was loved dearly by her family and her people both. “She dedicated her life to creating a subtle, but implicative, change in society, particularly with her continuous efforts for the empowerment of Indian women from the confines of the veil”— Devraj Singh of Jaipur, grandson of Maharani Gayatri Devi.

In the initial part of the autobiography she describes the code of conduct of royal families. The way she takes up history is that she recreates it through her life story. She talks about general ambience in Cooch Beehar. Though strict and conservative about royal women’s code of conduct, her Baroda grandparents were not too strict about Purdah concept. She inherited leadership qualities from her grandmother who was the first president of All India women’s conference. In nutshell, we can say that the first part of her autobiography deals with the life, duties and delights of royalty. We come to know Gayatri Devi’s mother’s protest to refuse the conservative concept of marriage: “She was afraid that after she had married him she would have to live the rest of her life shut up inside the great palace of Gwalior, in the most rigid and confining form of Purdah associating only with women and seeing no men at all except her husband”.

In her retelling of her life Maharani Gayatri Devi gives an account of the sociocultural ambience that was largely patriarchal. She has not used a psycho analytical framework to conceptualize herself nor does she dwell on remembered knowledge, but in a very brisk and crisp style she forges and narrates the world in which she existed, leaving it to her readers to conjecture and by implication put her together the background foregrounding the Self, which is History. Gayatri Devi’s autobiography not only recapitulates the history of identity formation as content but extends it as well by performing its basic structures during the process. As a deep complex and potentially authoritative report on the nature of the psyche and the phenomenon of will, her autobiography becomes a valuable treatise of her times. The autobiography is a well recorded graph of the author's mental, emotional and cultural growth

as an individual. The author highlights the men and women around her and socio-political context of her time. Seeing many poor villagers in Darjeeling she felt immense compassion. She never expressed, as a young princess, any kind of indifference and repulsion for the poor. This is a good quality of her noble-heart, suitable to a maiden of high birth. She writes: I loved to walk in Darjeeling, watching the village people and -getting into conversation with them, though I was saddened by their poverty and the miserable, torn and patched clothes their children wore. Autobiography is a well recorded graph of the author's mental, emotional and cultural growth as an individual. The events of her 'sport-mad' nature, her sentimental attraction for the elephants, her skill as a hunter in childhood, her colorful years of courtship, her anxiety about Jai's plane crash, her joy in marriage with Jai, her bridal anxiety for her suitability in Jaipur palace, her acceptance of the traditional 'purdah' in Jaipur palace as a sort of an adjustment, her happy married life with Maharaja of Jaipur—all provide the details of her subjective view of her own personality as well as self-analysis. In the book, Gayatri Devi writes about her carefree tomboy childhood, her courtship with the Maharaja of Jaipur, and her marriage and experiences living in the City Palace of Jaipur. She re-iterates about how she had to adjust to the new customs and traditions and life with the Maharaja's other two wives.

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Gayatri Devi spent most of her childhood in London and Cooch Behar, her father's estate. She had a fairytale childhood. But it had its share of tragedy. Her father died at the age of 36 when she was just a little girl. Gayatri Devi had a faint recollection of the days of mourning following his death. In her autobiography, *A Princess Remembers*, she wrote, "(I) have confused memories of my mother, dressed entirely in white, crying a lot and shutting herself in her cabin." At that time, Indira Devi, along with her five children — Ila, Jagadipendra, Indrajit, Gayatri and Menaka — was sailing back to India from England.

Despite severe opposition from her mother and her brother, Gayatri Devi married Sawai Man Singh II, the Maharaja of Jaipur, in 1940, when she was just 21. She was head over heels in love with the maharaja and agreed to be his third wife. In her memoir, she writes, "Ma predicted gloomily that I would become simply 'the latest addition to the Jaipur nursery'." But she didn't back down. What's more, she told the much-married maharaja that she would not lead an isolated life — as maharanis were usually kept behind purdah in those days — in the palace. Soon, she made a foray into politics with the maharaja's consent.

Gayatri Devi's autobiography is a landmark in the autobiographical writings by Indian 'Maharanis'. It is the story of a rani who gave up 'Purdah' to join politics and won every election. She played a vital role in the welfare of her state of Jaipur. Her life-story concentrates more on the personal events of her life than on politics. Rajmata Gayatri Devi and Jai's marriage was initially opposed by her parents, as Man Singh already had two wives, the daughters of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. However, her parents gave in to her determination, and she was married to Man Singh in 1939.

In her autobiography Gayatri Devi gave a vivid description of how she moved door-to-door and taught people, especially women voters, to identify her party symbol. She was afraid that even if people would reach the polling stations with an intention to vote for the Maharani, they might end up casting their votes to the other candidates.

She wrote in the book– ‘...They noticed a symbol showing a horse and a rider, agreed with each other that the Maharani rides so that must be her symbol... Then they caught sight of the emblem of flower. Ah, the flower of Jaipur– who else could it mean but the Maharani?’ As per her autobiography, she became too nervous before the result day. Her husband told her that for the honour of the Jaipur royal family she was expected to secure at least 5 thousand votes more than her nearest rival. Finally when the results came out, all of her opponents had been forced to forfeit their deposits.

Gayatri Devi narrates her life story and allows her readers to get glimpses of her life of excess and extravagance, how she was raised in a lavish palace which staffed over 500 servants, and shot her first panther when she was just twelve Elaine Showalter after divides feminine writing into two distinct verities. First type of women is as a reader and the second type as a writer. As a writer woman produces text with history theme, genres and structure of literature by women. These autobiographers present a feminist poetics, revealing the psychodynamics of female creativity with female language. They present women victimization which is their destiny from one generation to the next. In their poetics, they undergo feminist phase by rejecting the posture of femininity and use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wrong womanhood. In the female phase, they reject imitation and dependency and become autonomous. Their hermeneutics present a new language born out of there sufferings or tortures or new experiences.

Gayatri’s life story reflects Lacanian "mirror stage". Her story is the mirror which reflects her image vastly. When a daughter looks into the mirror the image she sees is inseparably linked with the image she has in her mind of her mother. Psychology tells us that mirrors are not mere curiosities for humans but a necessity. They give us an image of ourselves and it is upon the nature of this image that all our actions and reactions rest. Many

theoreticians have made a mark by discussing the effect of self-images, the most famous being Lacan's mirror stage.

Gayatri Devi has the image or the mirror of her mother in mind. Her mother overpowers her whole personality. She is guided by her mother at every step of life. Her mother does not approve Jai as a son-in-law in the beginning. She is against her being his third wife. Her mother was a role model for her, who had brought up her small children despite being a widow at a tender age. She had guided her daughters to be virtuous and compassionate. She has been bold to face the evils of the society. She presented in herself as a hostile woman who had revolted against her parents will to marry the man of her choice. She even had withstood the anger of her parents rather than revoking the decision. Gayatri's mother disliked to marry -the decided bridegroom for 'he was over twenty years senior and was known to be conservative' and she had to embrace, purdah. She fell in love with a young prince of Cooch Behar, Gayatri's father. This was great shock to her parents because when the marriage was settled it was as good as a convention.

In India an engagement cannot be broken easily. It is considered almost as binding as a marriage, and the wedding ceremony itself is only the final stage in forming an alliance that is made at the time of betrothal ceremony. The reaction on Ma's refusal of an arranged marriage with the Maharaja of Gwalior was 'tremendous and widespread'. In all the princely states the matter was much discussed and scandalized and it was considered astonishing matter because only a girl's 'whim' could break the alliance between two ruling Maratha families. Likewise Gayatri also was adamant to marry Jai despite her mother's reluctance. Gayatri Devi maintained smooth and affectionate relations with the two co-wives. The Second Maharani was like an elder sister to Gayatri. She called her as "Jo Didi" Jo stood for

Jodhpur and 'Didi' means 'elder sister'. She treated her with due respect and love. They also reciprocated the same love to Gayatri. Both the Maharanis helped Gayatri in different ways. First, Her Highness would tell Gayatri the 'orthodox ways of conduct' and dressing suitable colored costumes appropriate for the occasion.

Gayatri had to undergo many traditional rituals as the wife of Maharaja of Jaipur. As a new bride she had to perform 'a prayer ceremony' at the threshold to mark the entry into her husband's home. In the City Palace, she had to behave like a queen; had to observe Purdah whether she liked it or not. Certain social taboos were inflicted on the Indian women. 'Hindu women do not go to the funeral'. On her first arrival she was a stranger to the sisters-in-law because 'women do not go to the wedding of their male relatives'. In Rajputana women don't wear saris. Gayatri Devi had to wear bright colored ankle length skirt and the short bodice and over-jacket as well as a big shawl to be 'used as a veil'. Gayatri Devi was not allowed to see Jai's father, as Rajputana custom goes that 'a wife is not to be presented to her husband's elder male relatives' and she saw him through a screen or at distance. A young girl in India is always escorted because it was a practice among Indians not to send 'a young girl unaccompanied in India'. Indian Princesses were not allowed to go to cinemas and restaurants unaccompanied. Gayatri found her life as Maharani in Jaipur more formal and full of conventions. She was fully aware of the change. She tried to adjust and adapt to this life as Maharani. However, she underwent a mental tension in doing so. She suffered from fear as a result of the diffidence she felt as a Maharani, "Only then did I realize how burdensome I had found the trappings of ruler ship and the duties of being a maharani."

Thus Gayatri Devi accepted the traditional responsibilities of the wife of a ruler from Cuchwah line. In spite of her liberal, progressive views cultivated in Cooch Behar State, Gayatri Devi did not refuse the Rajput conventions to be observed by a Rajput wife especially by a Maharani and showed her sense of understanding and adjustment."

Gayatri's Relationship with her siblings is good. Other great autobiographers of the age like Shobhaa De, Gayatri Devi, Kamala Das & Nayantara Sahgal. Kamala Das, Gayatri Devi, Jhamak Ghimire, Taslima Nasreen and Malala are nostalgic when they have reminiscences of their childhood with their brothers. They all are feministic, but liberal as their relationship with the males in family is harmonious. Gayatri Devi, Nayantara Sahgal, Shobhaa De and Malala have sweet remembrance of cordial relationship between parents, but Kamala Das and Taslima Nasreen are victims of disharmony in family, as her parents are never in good terms. Theory of Lacanian mirror stage fits all these writers as they are influenced by their mothers. Maharani Gayatri Devi describes her life story in the periphery of siblings and mother. In childhood, her husband in youth and politics and people in the growing age. She recollects her childhood days with glee:

“The bedroom was crowded with maids, female relatives, friends and us children, she held court for us all.....”

In her autobiography, Gayatri Devi makes a note of many details of women's life and general customs of her time. Women did not have any voice in their marriages. Almost all the marriages were settled by the parents and women had to consent to the choice made by the parents. Gayatri Devi writes about the marriage-incident of her mother and exemplifies the conditions then prevailing. The arranged marriages were in practice and a basic creed behind it was : Arranged marriages were—indeed, still are—so accepted a part of Indian society that the idea of marrying for love is considered rather dubious and risky Western idea, not to be trusted, especially in the hands of the young people. In a Princely palace, there were special zenana quarters for the women. They kept 'purdah' to keep themselves in seclusion and away from men other than the husband. Puradh was introduced in these classes only after the Muslim invasion in the 12th century. Jaipur State was known for strict purdah system. Ma,

Gayatri's mother was hesitant to get Gayatri Devi married to Jai for the strict Purdah in Jai's Palace. First Her Highness and Jo-Didi strictly observed purdah and even Gayatri Devi had to observe purdah in the initial days of her marriage. In Baroda State, Gayatri's grandfather 'dispensed with the rules of purdah'. Similarly, Cooch Behar was a progressive state and there was no purdah system. With this progressive background Gayatri Devi felt awkward to observe purdah and Jai had to convince her that Gayatri Devi could 'drop purdah altogether' after a year or two when people got used to the idea of 'abandonment of purdah'. Gayatri Devi mentions an extreme instance-of seclusion of women' by purdah. When Jo Didi was ill, the doctor diagnosed from the passage outside her room only on the basis of the details of her temperature, pulse etc. got from the maid servants.

Polygamy prevailed in princely palaces. Jai had three wives viz. his senior wife, Jo Didi and Gayatri Devi. The first two wives came from those families in which polygamy was a practice. There was no hostility or jealousy among the wives, on the contrary, 'a civilized and mannerly relationship can be cultivated between the wives of a same man'. Polygamy was not confined to the princes but it was 'a commonplace custom'.

The book comes alive with Gayatri Devi's bitter emotions as she watches the disintegration of the royalty in India. It is in her honest bitterness that she becomes quite touching. One feels great pity for a beautiful woman who obviously believes she was born for it all and more, only to have it snatched away from her by vote-hungry politicians.

III. Conclusion

In her retelling of her life, Maharani Gayatri Devi gives an account of the sociocultural ambience that was largely patriarchal. She has not used a psycho analytical framework to conceptualize herself nor does she dwell on remembered knowledge, but in a very brisk and crisp style she forges and narrates the world in which she existed, leaving it to

her readers to conjecture and by implication put her together the background foregrounding the Self, which is History. Gayatri Devi's autobiography not only recapitulates the history of identity formation as content but extends it as well by performing its basic structures during the process. As a deep complex and potentially authoritative report on the nature of the psyche and the phenomenon of will, her autobiography becomes a valuable treatise of her times.

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