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Construction of a Socialist Feminist Consciousness in Vina Mazumdar's *Memories of a Rolling Stone*

MONALISA JHA

Abstract. The present paper shall seek to delve into Dr. Vina Mazumdar's memoir *Memories of a Rolling Stone* to trace the growth of a feminist consciousness in an Indian feminist activist. Dr. Vina Mazumdar (1927-2013) was a pioneer of women's studies and a leading figure of the women's movement in India. The paper proposes to look at her memoir as an archival record of the beginning of the women's movement. It shall seek to trace by using close reading as method and Partha Chatterjee's work on the idea of governance and governmentality as methodology, how women's activism in India was nourished by networks of affiliation and interlocution within the interstices of patriarchally conditioned state power, and how feminist activists like Mazumdar at the time formulated subjectivities which occupy a grey area between cooption and resistance to patriarchal discursive systems.

Keywords : Memoir; governance; women's movement; feminist consciousness; activism.

Vina Mazumdar, academic, activist and institution builder is often hailed as the pioneer of the Indian women's movement. By her own admission, the two epithets she likes best are "recorder and chronicler of the Indian women's movement and the grandmother of women's studies in South Asia." (Mazumdar, 1) Her memoir, *Memories of a Rolling Stone*, first published by the feminist press Zubaan in 2010, is an archival record of the history of the consolidated women's movement, which changed the course of Mazumdar's own life, and the lives of women in India by giving birth to the women's and women's studies movement. This paper aspires to explore the development of a feminist consciousness as evidenced in Mazumdar's autobiography, and to argue that this consciousness, however, remains embedded in and is framed by a postcolonial patriarchal discursive system. Through this analysis, the paper aims to show how early feminist activists in India, unlike in the West, did not violently eschew patriarchal modes, but negotiated for a sense of self which could function with relative freedom within these patriarchal systems.

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In keeping with her background as a social scientist, Mazumdar's memoir is organised into sections which delineate the decades of her life. 'The First Twenty Years' (Mazumdar, i) accounts for her birth and a liberal upbringing. Born in 1927, the year that the Indian National Congress declared complete independence as its goal for India, Mazumdar came of age in 1947 in a middle class family in Bengal, the youngest of five children; Mazumdar describes her childhood as a happy one in an extended family. Her mother's love for reading had been passed on to her, and it was her mother who taught her the lesson "the more the freedom, the more the responsibility" (6). Mazumdar belongs to the generation of feminist activists and scholars who trace their maturity or development through a matrilineage, thinking back through their mothers and other ancestral mother figures in their families. She belongs to the early generation of women feminists who 'position their lives within a larger matrilineal lineage in their narratives.' (Devenish, 280) Thus, apart from her mother, Mazumdar refers to her aunt who "understood the importance of education for women in the family". (Mazumdar,17) Her aunt and her mother were adamant that all girls in the family be educated. It is interesting that though the male members of the family were conservative, they seem to have acceded to this demand made by the family women without much opposition. Being a daughter of a family which set great pride in its level of education, its liberal acculturation and its nationalist and socialist ideological underpinnings, the cause of educating daughters seems to have been viewed with an indulgent tolerance. In fact it is her mother who paves the way for Mazumdar's journey to Oxford for her higher studies by reminding her father of "his promise that in education he will not make a distinction between his sons and daughters". (Mazumdar, 19) However, this progressive attitude had a more conventional basis: an astrologer had advised against an early marriage for Mazumdar. A stint abroad seems to have offered the perfect solution to naturally delaying the marriage of a young daughter and to stave off social pressure to do so.

When Mazumdar returns to India in 1950, she is apprehensive that her father may not allow her to work citing family tradition. However, she is pleasantly surprised by his agreeing to her request. He reasons that the new Constitution of India is built on the fundamental principle of gender equality, and being a law abiding man, he must follow it, 'When the law changes, I must adapt myself to its requirements' (28).

Thus, while Mazumdar traces her own independence of spirit and love of learning through a matrilineage, it is a benevolent and indulgent patriarchal system which makes this independence of thought and action possible. This is because Mazumdar, though a woman, is a part of civil society which Partha Chatterjee has defined as 'the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law'. (Chatterjee, 4) This protection or patronage by male authority figures is in effect one of the prerogatives and privileges of belonging to a nationalist educated elitist middle class which supports and upholds a liberal attitude towards women, as long as this does not upset the general status quo or gender positions. This continues in Mazumdar's professional life. When she falls in trouble due to her political activism as a faculty member at Patna University, the Registrar calls for her and sanctions a two year study leave to avoid punitive action for her political activism, 'Beg, borrow or steal, but get out of the country.' Again, it is her elder brother Benoy who finances this second stint abroad.

Mazumdar comes back and is appointed as an Education Officer at the UGC. This is followed by a stint as teaching faculty in Berhampur. Mazumdar makes her fateful return to the UGC in 1972 to be closer to her daughters pursuing higher education at the capital. The fourth part of the memoir is an account of Mazumdar's return in 1972 to the University Grants Commission, and her fateful tryst with the Committee on The Status of Women in India. (CSWI) The UN had declared the decade 1975-1985 as the International Women's Decade. Member states were asked to submit reports on the status of women in their countries. Nurul Hassan, the then minister for Education and Prof J.P Naik, eminent educationist reconstituted the committee with Dr Phulrenu Guha as chairperson and Vina Mazumdar as member secretary. Mazumdar's memoir recounts how seasoned politician and Minister Nurul Hassan went and talked to the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi regarding the necessity for the committee. If Gandhi needed to save face at the United Nations, she had to allow for the setting up of this committee. Mazumdar says, 'I can however now state confidently, that if (the prime Minister) had any clue about our emerging conclusions, she would never have agreed'. (Mazumdar, 70) This was because this work was to prove to be an eye opener. In Mazumdar's own words, "Our findings… revealed our own ignorance and shattered our self image as social scientists/ teachers and

as 'daughters of independence.'(68) For Mazumdar and the others, "a lasting outcome of this shared experience was the emergence of a 'collective conscience'(68). The large scale marginalization, poverty and invisibility of the majority of women in the Indian laboring class did not make for a pretty political picture. 'Before the rest of the government could realize what the report contained, it was placed before Parliament'. (81) Mazumdar joins the ICSSR in 1975. J.P Naik, as Gandhian was determined to fight the Emergency, as it heralded the end of democracy in India, , and thought of developing a research program focusing on poor women ' to provide a cover for social scientists to demonstrate the need for restoring democracy in India.' (85) The political implications of a sponsored research program focusing on poor women will not be apparent to the powers that be- at least not just yet. To revive the women's movement was changed to 'the social debate' on the woman's question on Naik Saheb's suggestion, (86) The ICSSr's programme of women's studies, was thus born 'under the shadow of the National Emergency'. (86)

Mazumdar marks this period as ushering in a change in her point of view and transforming g her from an academic to an activist in her memoir: while her earlier struggles represented an individual woman's efforts to balance a job and family, the new struggle was a "collective and ideological one to rediscover the Indian nation… from the perspective of India's hidden and unacknowledged majority: poor and working women in rural and urban areas." (84)

With the end of the emergency and the coming of the Janata government to office, the ICSSR decided to intervene to ensure the implementation of the recommendations of the *Towards Equality* report. It was decided that a Press Conference shall be called, but Naik Saheb suggested, 'Make Professor Ganguly, Srinivas and Mitra address the conference. You can be there but don't talk'. (91) One can easily understand the political perspicuity of a seasoned politician that public opinion, fresh after the tyrannies of the Emergency, would not be very receptive towards the idea of a vocal woman, however justified. As a result working groups were set up by the Planning Commission and concerned ministries. When the Working group of employment on women ran into opposition in the Planning commission, Mazumdar was advised "to organise protests by women's organizations". (93) However in September 1980 a new government came to power and threw out the

earlier government's plan. Instead a new document called the sixth plan framework pushed women back to near invisibility. Women's organizations needed to gather together to counter this, and in 1980, a unique partnership of women's groups named The Seven Sisters as named by Vina Mazumdar was born. The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission was called, to whom Aruna Asaf Ali said, "Swaminathan, how dare you cut women out of the Plan? We won't have it." (106). The coming together of these masses of women was historic. In Mazumdar's own words, "We had been a small group of bureaucrats and researchers trying to do things. Now we had massive backing from all these organizations, all raring to go." (106)

The appointment of Madhuri Shah as the first woman chairperson of the UGC proved pivotal in introducing Women's Studies in India. A major departure from how Women's Studies had developed in the USA was its treatment in India as direction not discipline, "we don't want it as a separate discipline that will marginalize us… Women's Studies need to be incorporated within various disciplines." (115) As Mary E John contends, Mazumdar's memoir unravels the workings of state power and 'our political understandings and engagements with such power' (John, 111) Vina Mazumdar alerts us to "a productive notion of power that could be harnessed during the darkest times, in order to slyly make power do otherwise, in this case to make the state accountable to its most marginalized citizens." (122)

Scholars and historians of the women's movement have noted the paradox inherent at the heart of Women's Studies in India :

> What does one make of the fact that one arm of the government, grappling against indifference and apathy, commissioned the report Towards Equality, while another arm went on to impose a state of Emergency against clamorous demands for equality, freedom and justice? (Sreekumar, 59)

An alternative way of looking at this conundrum may be provided by Mazumdar's memoir. This may be better understood in terms of governance, which Partha Chatterjee describes as "the body of knowledge and set of techniques used by, or on behalf of, those who govern.

Democracy … is not government of, by and for the people. Rather, it should be seen as the politics of the governed". (Chatterjee, 4) Chatterjee thus describes the postcolonial society as a society of the governed, the governed here being not just a policy category but a political subjectivity.

The memoir thus reveals how these imaginaries of feminism were built, which were not purely critical of the state, or of the government, but sought to work in and through its structures, to frame the post colonialist nation as a site for women's progress, while however building upon what may be called an ethics of inauthenticity. Prathama Banerjee refers to the abiding binary between the social and the political in India:

> From the nineteenth century onwards reformers mobilized the state's externality in their struggles against entrenched orthodoxies and lobbied with colonial officials for laws against unjust social practices like bride burning and enforced widowhood. (Banerjee, 83)

The difficulty in the Indian context was of working within a pre given social/political binary, for India "was not a society in the first place, even though it might be a nation." (84) Banerjee coins the term 'developmentality' for how the state uses its political and/or social role in India to 'lead' the people into a brighter future through non party social movements. Developmentality holds together two opposing imperatives of representing the social, but also transforming it "in a ceaseless play of the social and the political" (87). Perhaps this is what J.P Naik means when he tells Mazumdar, "you are not a political party, yet you have mounted what is a political movement…" (Mazumdar, 121)

As Vina Mazumdar's memoir shows, women activists sought to inhabit the grey area within governmentalities and developmentalities to escalate change. Third world feminists worked with and against the bureaucratic technologies of the state, to participate in techniques of 'governance' as enunciated by Chatterjee, to bring about emancipatory changes in women's lives.

In referring to themselves as 'the daughters of independence' Mazumdar frames herself and her co activists within a paradigm of such a sociopolitical developmentality, as that which resists the government

but exercises agency in the women's movement paradoxically through governing measures.

As is clear from her autobiography, while critical of the sign of patriarchy, Mazumdar has also looked for guidance and mentorship through patriarchal father figures. Her stance towards the patriarchal or towards state power is thus more complex and ambiguous than one of simple complicity or outright resistance. Feminist activists of the women's movement in the late twentieth century like Mazumdar seem to have striven to work in the interstices of state power, occupying a grey zone between cooption and opposition. As Mazumdar's memoir shows, what has been pragmatically actionable for women activists in India has been to use the methods or modes or assistance at hand, without interrogating too deeply its ideological implications or genealogy. Thus a politics of what may be termed inauthenticity; a willingness to negotiate through modes which may be inherently patriarchal but still useful seems to have been a part of the praxis of women's movements and the construction of socialist feminist selves in India in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Monalisa Jha
Assistant Professor of English
Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata

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