

Women Voice in the Novel of Ashapurna Devi

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Abstract

Feminist texts abound in the literary world. Few, however, have been able to capture a woman's many feelings as profoundly as Ashapurna Devi does in her *Pratham Pratisruti* in Bengali and *Arupa Patangiya Kalita* in Assamese. Despite being published in separate decades, the two novels highlight the striking similarities in how Patriarchy operates throughout time and location. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of female protagonists in both novels and to gain a better understanding of their social reality through the Protagonists' own lived experiences.

Keywords: Feminist, family, Ideal, Ashapurna Devi, Bengali literature, identity, postcolonial studies, women's emancipation.

Introduction

Ashapurna Devi, a prominent Bengali woman novelist (1909–1995) focused on women's creativity and enlightenment during the colonial and postcolonial period in Bengal, India. She herself displayed immense will power, tenacity and an indomitable spirit which enabled her to eke out a prominent place for herself in the world of creative writing. Her life spanned both colonial India and independent India. These diverse experiences shaped her mind and persona and helped her portray the emerging face of the enlightened Bengali middle-class woman. Her writings trace the evolution of the Bengali woman and empowered individual struggling against the shackles of discriminatory norms imposed upon her by society. She traces the extremely conservative upbringing that the female members of her generation were subjected to and goes on to show how different individuals responded to these structures in different ways. Some would comply unquestioningly, some would comply simply because they did not dare to protest, while others would break free and find their own niche in the outside world. These issues are addressed by Ashapurna Devi in many short stories as well, but a critical analysis of her trilogy *Pratham Pratisruti* [The First Promise] (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967) and *Bakulkatha* [The Story of Bakul] (1974) enables us to experience this struggle against a gradually unfolding backdrop where India moves on from being a British colony to an

independent country. The trilogy traces the life of three generations of a family — Satyabati, Subarna and finally Bakul and establishes Ashapura Devi as a path-breaking champion of women's emancipation in an era when such endeavours were few and far between.

About The Writer

Indian women writers form a formidable part of this literary brigade— Ashapura Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Kamla Das, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapoor, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy,— the list is endless. One of the best-known Indian woman litterateurs of 20th century is Smt. Ashapura Devi (1909-1999)—the unanimously acknowledged uncrowned queen of Bangla literature. Winner of numerous awards, including Jnanpith Award for her novel Pratham Pratisruti (The First Spark), this honorary D. Lit. From 3 universities (Rabindrabharati University, Bardhaman University, and Jabalpur University), has published nearly 225 books. She is at home in all the genres with novels, poems, and short stories. Of these, short story is, according to her own words, her actual domain: “When I finish writing a successful short story, I am more elated than having finished a vast novel. The vast has the joy of ‘construction’, the small has the fulfilment of ‘creation’ (Ashapura Devi’s Preface to Self-Selected Best Short Stories). Her works have been amply translated in all major Indian languages and of course, in English. Many of her novels and short stories have been made into memorable (and commercially hugely successful) films and television serials. Her short stories, in particular, portray the quintessential middle class Bengali households. But the human predicament that is portrayed in these ‘regional’ stories is universal in appeal. The Keralite and the Kashmiri can equally empathise with the Bengali, such is the consummate artistry of the artist. I will discuss some of the stories from the Self-Selected Best Short Stories (Model Publishing House, Kolkata, 2000).

Ashapura Devi was born in a Baidya family. She was born on 8 January 1909, at her maternal uncle's home at Potoldanga in North Calcutta. Her ancestral village is Begumpur in Hooghly District. Her birth name was Asha Purna Devi (Gupta).

Her early childhood was spent in a traditional and extremely conservative family at Vrindaban Basu Lane amongst a large number of relatives. Due to the domination of her grandmother, a staunch supporter of old customs and conservative ideals, the female children of the house were not allowed to go to school. Private tutors were employed only for the

boys. It is said that as a baby Ashapurna used to listen to the readings of her brothers sitting opposite to them and that was how she learnt the alphabets.

Ashapurna's father Harendra Nath Gupta was a famous artist of the time who worked for C. Lazarus & Co. fine furniture makers as a designer. Ashapurna's mother Sarola Sundari came from a very enlightened family and was a great book lover. It was her "intensive thirst" for reading classics and story books which was transmitted to Ashapurna and her sisters in their early age.

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The period in which Ashapurna was raised was socially and politically restless, a time of nationalist agitation and awakening. Though the children of Harendra Nath did not have direct contact with the outside world, they were quite sensitive to the restlessness going on throughout the country led by Mahatma Gandhi and other political leaders who were ready to sacrifice their lives to bring independence. Thus, different factors were responsible for nourishing the specific culture which guided Ashapurna from her early childhood to youth, and carried her to a definite platform through various experiences and ideals of life.

According to Ashapurna, she and her sisters used to compete with each other by composing and reciting poems. This gave rise to an unusual tenacity which inspired Ashapurna to secretly send a poem to Sishu Sathi in 1922. Ashapurna was thirteen 4 and her poem "Bairer Dak" (The Call from the Outside) was published, with a request from Editor Rajkumar Chakravorty to send more poems and stories. That was the beginning which developed into a never-ending flourish for Ashapurna, culminating into a permanent place for her into the realm of Bengali literature.

Ashapurna was sent to be married in 1924 when she was fifteen years of age, leaving Calcutta for her betrothed's family residence in Krishnanagar. She was married to Kalidas Gupta, and the couple moved frequently as they established themselves. In 1927 they settled in Calcutta on Ramesh Mitra Road, Bhowanipur and later in a bigger house at 77 Beltola Road, where they lived until 1960. They then had to shift to a separate flat near Golpark with their only son Sushanta, daughter-in-law Nupur, and a granddaughter Shatarupa. Later, in

1967, another granddaughter, Shatadeepa, was added to the family. In 1970, Kalidas Gupta and Ashapura built their own house in Garia at 17 Kanungo Park. Ashapura lived there until she died on 13 July 1995.

In the beginning of her writing career, Ashapura wrote only for children – Chhoto Thakurdar Kashi Yatra (Great Uncle Goes to Varanasi) was the first printed edition published in 1938, followed by others throughout her literary career. In 1936, she first wrote a story for adults, "Patni O Preyoshi", published in the Puja issue of Ananda Bazar Patrika. Prem O Prayojan was her first novel for adults, published in 1944. Since this period, her writing continued as a never-ending process. Most of her writings marked a spirited protest both for men and women, against the inequality and injustice stemming from the gender-based discrimination and narrowness of outlook ingrained in traditional Hindu society. Ashapura Devi's stories lay threadbare the oppression women have to face and made a fervent appeal for a new social order, though not subscribing to the modern theoretical feminism of western mode. Her magnum opus, the trilogy Pratham Pratishruti (1964), Subarnolata (1967) and Bakul Katha (1974), symbolises an endless struggle for women to achieve equal rights. Upon her death, she was at the peak of her fame, leaving behind unique literary creations. Ashapura Devi had been widely honoured with a number of prizes and awards, noted below.

"The Prisoner" explores the pan-Indian mindset of the traditional Indian housewife who places her husband on a high pedestal and firmly turns a blind eye to all his faults and foibles. The protagonist Charusheela's moorings are so strong in the concept of "pati parameswar" that she puts her self-respect in the backburner and waits hand and feet on the man of her life. Though she is regularly roughed up by Taranath, her good-for-nothing husband, she cannot withstand it when her young son, Shankar, retaliates his father's illogical cruelty to his mother, and hits him back. She leaves her astounded son's home and goes with her husband to their dilapidated ancestral home in the village, in order to fulfil her marital vow of being inseparable from her husband till death parts them.

Projects of Ashapura Devi

In "The Homeless", the childless aged widow Annada, who is given shelter by her distant nephew, Bibhuti, constantly picks up fights and quarrels with Bibhuti's wife, his domestic helps, and even with his children, in order to keep up the facade of her self-respect that is slowly, but irrevocably, eroding away for living under one's mercy? One day, when the charade is ruthlessly torn apart by Ramola, Bibhuti's wife, Annada decides that enough is

enough. She leaves Bibhuti's home to find a place of her own. Though she is now literally homeless, she refuses to be trodden all over by the heartless Ramola in exchange of two square meals a day.

"The Butcher" reveals the merciless mind of Kamala, who performs her domestic duties to her in-laws at the cost of her dying son. While the child goes on wailing piteously, unable to bear the excruciating torment of his terminal illness, Kamala goes on cooking, because it is her kitchen day as per the "rules" of their joint family today. When the child dies on that very day, she accuses her in-laws to have butchered her son, by not letting her attend the terminally sick child even in his last minutes. Her husband Samaresh points out that in reality, she is the butcher. She in her desire to be a perfectly dutiful daughter-in-law, has neglected her duty as a mother.

"The Penance" is the story of the beautiful and intelligent woman Sunanda. She leaves her husband for her paramour, Kamalakshya, is deserted by her paramour in turn, and is taken back by her husband, Niranjana. Niranjana arranges a huge party, calling all his relatives and friends, to "celebrate" the "safe return" of his "abducted" wife. That is the story they fabricate to keep up their social stature. When Niranjana displays Sunanda's hand-written love-letters that he "bought" back from Kamalaksha, Sunanda realizes that from now on, she has to pay-act the role of a loving and loved wife, to keep up the charade of a happily married couple in front of the world: this is her life-long penance.

"The Ensign" is the story of the mother-daughter duo Savitri and Jayanti. Officegoer Jayanti looks down upon her uneducated, housewife mother, Savitri, who, thinks Jayanti, does not do a great job by simply running the house hold. Only when Savitri is struck down with thrombosis and Jayanti has to shoulder the household 6 chores taking a day off from her office, does she come to realize that it is the tireless hands of the housewife that actually move the house, and not the money of the office-goer.

Too late, Jayanti realizes that she, her father, her siblings— everyone has simply exploited the hapless housewife, has taken her for granted. Had they paid her due love and affection, had they shared a minimum of household chores, keeping the stove burning would not have been a burden to Savitri, which led to her sharp temper and ultimately her paralysis caused by cerebral thrombosis. Almost the same fate is shared by Lilavati, the protagonist of "The exhausted pen". Lilavati, the aged widowed mother, is now a burden to her sons and

daughters-in-law. She spends her days mostly in the family 'puja' room, at the feet of God, away from the disrespectful eyes and rude tongues of her family members.

"The Penumbra" is the poignant story of two sisters, one beautiful and talented, always hogging the limelight, the other ugly and termagant, drawing attention for all the wrong reasons. The reader's heart goes out to the ugly younger sister, whose secret sweetheart dies in abject penury, while the beautiful elder sister, the cynosure of all eyes, is being married off to a wealthy NRI with great pomp.

Each story reveals one or another territory of the human mind. Ashapura Devi is a master storyteller. The compact plot, the realistic and wholly credible characterizations are the chief attractions of her stories. Reading the stories, one gets a good glimpse of the lives of very, very ordinary people. In Ashapura Devi's own words, "From the outside, it is impossible to gauge the inner life of these seemingly ordinary people. A storm may be raging in the mind of the man buying vegetables, or in the mind of the woman cooking food. A sudden spark in their words/actions reveals the inner turmoil. The short story must capture that moment of revelation. Once the revealed is recognized, it is found that even the lowliest deserves pity and mercy, not hate or wrath".

Not surprisingly, the reader yearns for more such 'revelation'. After finishing one story, one is goaded towards the next. That is the hypnotic spell that Ashapura Devi wields over her millions of die-hards' fans'

Ashapura Devi and Feminism

The second wave of Feminism grew out of the civil rights movements of the 1960s with the publication of Simon De Beauvoir's 'Second Sex' where she attempts to confront human history from a feminist perspective. De Beauvoir's primary thesis is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the other, defined exclusively in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated. He extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas a woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she waits for him to save her. This distinction is the basis of all de Beauvoir's later arguments. And also, with the publication of Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) where she traces the return of women to the domestic life after their pre-war emancipation. She argues that women were

socially pressured into becoming homemakers and she concludes that the life of a housewife prevents women from developing full, autonomous identities. She argues that both men and women must reject the feminine mystique, and she encourages women to pursue self-fulfilment through education.

The Indian women's movement began in the nineteenth century. Women had begun to form their organization from the end of the nineteenth century on both the local and national levels. In the years before independence, they had two issues; political rights and reform of personal laws to struggle for. Indian women's movement was based on their participation in the freedom struggles to get their rights. Indian women call upon freedom, gender equality and stop violence against 8 women. The movement had begun within a man called "Ram Mohan Roy". He began to focus on women's issues like political participation, polygamy, sexual violations against women and illiteracy. In his opinion, women should have an effective role in all fields of life; political, economically and socially. He put the roots of Indian women as one of the main factors responsible for the state of Indian society. He improved the condition of Indian women which was considered the first step in reform.

Devi, As A Feminist

The women of the family have always held the central role in her magnum opus Pratham Pratishruti and through them, Devi has enrooted the fact that emerging as a significant voice is the only way to change their status. The power relationships within the family in the patriarchal framework has condemned women to domesticity, illiteracy and blind ritual practices and hence, she has kept on saying that women should fight for their rights and overcome the fear of censure of community through practical reasoning, as did she. Her fearless reasoning towards freedom and equality, between males and females, is where her lasting voice lies. The women of Pratham Pratishruti are a strong indicator of Ashapura's feminism, whose perspective of the role of a woman differs from that of the West. She has perceived her women to be goddess Durga, who can manage the family lived in one hand and the outer world with the other, preserving the Sree of our traditional cultural values, as a complete Bhartiya (Indian) Nari (Woman). She was arguing for what Sangari and Vaid call 'an objective gender-neutral method of inquiry'. Through the voice of her protagonist, Satyabati, she has claimed freedom of thought and practice of equal justice that is their fundamental right as being a human. Moreover, she set out to remind the world that a woman is a human being as well. However, she was a realistic and empathetic feminist, who never

really wanted to be called feminist and did not see men as the enemy but she saw them as a compatriot in need of rising consciousness. According to her, women must think more realistically and prove their worth and capability to the world and bring about social change by conquering rampant commodification.

Conclusion

This is the question that had been addressed in all Ashapura Devi's work and Pratham Pratishruti is a facsimile of her own life. She believed that all the protests and revolutions start from home and she hence has acknowledged the title 'kitchen writer'. The novel, was indeed a cutting edge one as it criticized all aspects of social life, not only the situation of women but also the social situation, the colonial life. It covered all the sections. However, for me, Ashapura Devi could not come out of the fact that family life is obvious to the women. She could make Suhas (Suhasini, daughter of Satya's sister-in-law Shankari) independent and not married. Somewhere she believed that it was a severe need for the women to get married, it's an unavoidable truth of life, whereas, being non-married was prevalent at that time. And I do not comply with the ending of the novel, where Satya leaves her family and children in utter repugnance. Satya, when lost her mother could realize the pain of motherlessness, we found her remorse over the fact she could not get her mother's presence enough or rather didn't give her enough time. But in the end, she did the same to her children as well. She could deny the marriage of Subarna which would have added to her rebellious character, or she could accept the marriage and send her back to the in-laws once it's time. However, Satyabati's promise to herself and her younger generation of life of knowledge and ethical judgments, in short, the emergence of women with the greater social agency is thus a generational project which made this ground-breaking novel at that particular time quite an example of doughtiness.

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