

Ashapura Devi's 'Women' — Emerging Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Ashapura 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 and these diverse experiences shaped her mind and persona and helped her to portray the emerging face of the enlightened Bengali middle-class woman. Her writings trace the evolution of the Bengali woman as an enlightened 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 Ashapura 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.

KEYWORDS

Ashapura Devi, Bengali literature, identity, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, women's emancipation

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The twentieth century in Bengal, India, has been a period of turmoil, in the political, social and cultural spheres. Common people were the worst affected as they had to undergo a complete overhauling of their value system, of traditions and beliefs nourished and nurtured over years, over generations. The unrest was caused, to a very large extent, by the fact that the British colonizers were on their way out. India finally attained independence in August 1947 and started struggling to get used to the new robe of independence which would fit snugly only with time. The transition from a colonized situation to one of independence resulted in dilemmas, confusions and fragmented notions. The British had undoubtedly exploited and harmed India in many ways, but they had also left in their wake some positive notions and had successfully prodded and nudged the complacent Indian people to ponder over their life, their philosophy. They had raised questions and had provided them with glimpses into another way of life. The men folk were influenced no doubt, but the sustained and deeply etched impact it had left on the women was to become noticeable only with time. Independence from British rule was welcomed and celebrated widely, but along with that came the conviction that the ways of life should be changed and that the time was ripe for the woman to step out. However, this change which compassed the political, social and cultural spheres did not come easily and smoothly without any resistance. Ironically, most of the resistance came from within the system, at times from the women themselves.

Many authors — novelists and poets and short story writers have written about this historical juncture, about the emancipation of the Bengali women during the years of India's struggle for independence and at a time when India had just gained independence. This emancipation came about in diverse ways. We read and hear about women making themselves heard within the house, participate in crucial decision making processes within the house. We come across women stepping outside the house to make a living, to improve upon the existing standard of living. On the whole these were women who were trying to rediscover their own selves and who were struggling to discover a new independent identity for themselves. Quite a few of them opted to use education as a means of getting accepted in what was so long believed to be a man's world. In my article, I propose to focus on a writer whose life bore signs of a similar struggle and whose protagonists also bear witness to this particular phase of woman's emancipation with a focus on her pen.

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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 a colonial India and an independent India and these diverse experiences have shaped her mind and persona and helped her to portray the emerging face of the enlightened Bengali middle class woman. Her writings trace the evolution of the Bengali woman as an enlightened 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 strictures in different ways. Some would comply unquestioningly, some would comply simply because they would not dare to protest, while others would break free and find their own niche in the outside world.

These issues have been addressed by Ashapura 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) would enable 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 in a family — Satyabati, Subarna and finally Bakul and establishes Ashapura Devi as a pathbreaking champion of women's emancipation in an era when such endeavours were few and far between. As Indira Chowdhury writes in *Rethinking Motherhood, Reclaiming a Politics*:

It is significant that Ashapura in telling the story of three generations of women sees the 19th century as the original moment for the formation of women as subjects of their own discourses. But it is also important to remember that it is precisely her location in the 20th century and in the post-independent Indian state that compels her to frame the problem in ways that challenge colonial, reformist and nationalist notions of maternity (CHOWDHURY 1998: WS 47).

In *Aar ek Ashapura* [Another Ashapura] written by the author herself (DEVI 2008), and comprising of numerous short pieces in the form of memoirs, intellectual thoughts, short discussions on various aspects of contemporary literature, the author reminisces about her childhood days and tells us how her mother was the chief inspiration for her interest in literature at a very young age. As was the practice of the day, she was never sent to school. Yet, even as she stayed home she learnt to read as she listened to her two older brothers learning their lessons. She hailed from a rather conservative family which did not really believe in educating the girl child (DEVI 2008: 4). She never had access to formal educa-

tion and could never attend school. But their mother was not at all averse to her and her sisters learning to read and was in fact quite enthusiastic about it. She, in fact, allowed her three daughters Ratnamala, Ashapura and Sampurna to browse through books and read whatever they wanted to. Because her mother worshipped books and education, she took the easy way out when she realized that her otherwise naughty middle daughter could be kept under control and out of mischief if only she was handed a book and made to sit on a rather high window sill from where it was impossible for the little girl to climb down. Then they moved house when she was five years old and started living in a nuclear family. In fact in her short essay called *Jaa dekhi, tai likhi* [I Write whatever I See] (DEVI 2008: 3), Ashapura Devi has openly acknowledged that because their father used to draw and paint regularly, and because of their mother's intrinsic love for literature, she and her siblings had developed a mental framework somewhat different from the rest of their cousins. Ashapura has written quite candidly in the section called *Khela theke Lekha* [From Playing to Writing] (DEVI 2008: 4) that she had access to a lot of so-called adult literature even at that young age and in her consistent struggle to understand what she was reading, she often ended up learning them by heart. This was the time when she discovered Tagore and began appreciating his writings. She remains grateful for the fact that the siblings were given free access to the world of literature and nobody ever thought of controlling this freedom. To quote her:

Slowly and steadily a completely new world was getting created within my mind. It was a world of comprehension, of feeling. It was a world with a never-ending flow of feelings. These were feelings partially incomprehensible and partially reacting to the world of comprehension (DEVI 2008: 7).¹

This was the state of mind with which Ashapura Devi decided to take the first step towards being an 'author'. She recounts the initial years of hardship after she got married and entered a household completely devoid of books and had to live practically behind an iron-curtain. She comments satirically: "For girls, the in-laws' place is not really a place strewn with flowers" (DEVI 2008: 8).

Ashapura Devi in her reminiscences has talked about the strong winds of nationalism blowing over India, which was struggling to free itself from the clutches of the British colonizers. But as she herself maintains, the mainstay of her writings was only people. "Only people came

¹ All translations in this paper from Bengali into English are done by Suchorita Chattopadhyay unless otherwise indicated.

within the confines of my ability, the middle class, homely people, whom I really knew intimately. I never try to reach out beyond the world I am familiar with" (DEVI 2008: 9). Ashapura wanted to draw attention to the problems faced by the woman, the mother, who was constantly having to negotiate with the demands of her society. She was writing about the changes that her society was undergoing during the colonial and postcolonial period and tried to create characters who would reflect these changes. To refer to Indira Chowdhury's interpretation of Ashapura Devi's agenda:

The first two parts of Ashapura's trilogy focuses on what it means to become a mother in colonial Bengal — what are the responsibilities and what, if any, are the choices — and through this problematic focuses on the issue of female subjectivity. By offering through her 19th century characters alternative accounts of motherhood Ashapura qualifies the idealising and naturalising accounts of motherhood and attempts to mediate the complexities and often, the impossibility of mother — daughter relationships within patriarchal parameters. The act of becoming a mother within patriarchy signifies the loss of one's own mother — the fulfillment of a girl's social destiny condemns her to the state of motherlessness (CHOWDHURY 1998: WS 49).

Ashapura Devi herself has commented on the circumstances under which she composed her trilogy. The first volume was set almost two hundred years back against the backdrop of a rich household in rural Bengal. It traces the childhood days of child bride Satyabati, the protagonist and her initiation into her in-laws' house. First published in 1964, the book got her the Rabindra Puroshkar (a prestigious literary award in memory of Rabindranath Tagore) the next year. The second volume of the trilogy *Subarnalata* was named after Satyabati's daughter, the protagonist of this volume and is set in a middle class family based in Kolkata. This is a family which is desperately hanging on to the remnants of arrogance even after losing all their wealth. According to Ashapura Devi, *Subarnalata* is an emissary from the world she herself had dwelt in as a child. She epitomizes an age which has witnessed the helplessness of women locked within four walls in the city. It explores the disdain and neglect that women faced even in cities in those days. Ashapura Devi has tried to portray some of this pain and trauma that she had seen women witnessing, in the second volume of her trilogy. The third volume, *Bakulkatha*, traces the life of Bakul, the youngest daughter of *Subarnalata*. But Bakul is more of an observer, reporter and analyst than a protagonist herself. She views her society objectively and comments on it from a distance. Bakul looks at and tries to capture through her pen, a society which is being tossed by waves, changing its hues every second minute,

continuously undergoing changes in its shape and consistency and wonders how she can possibly hope to capture it in its totality — whether it is a plausible attempt at all. Ashapura Devi frankly admits that this trilogy has brought her tremendous appreciation, respect and love. She tells us that times have changed. Women are no longer as helpless as they were once upon a time. They are emerging from the confines of the household with confidence and are achieving great success in various fields. But she also throws in a word of caution. Have they actually received complete emancipation? Have they been able to completely overcome and solve the problems they have been facing down ages?

Haven't those birds who have broken free from the cages, got entangled in a new and strange web of another all-consuming hunter and struggling hard to break free again? This hunter is known by the name 'Modernity'. Not only have women got themselves entangled in her colourful and glittery web, but society, literature, culture and civilization itself have also been ensnared in it (DEVI 2008: 12).

Ashapura Devi admits that though she believes that *Pratham Pratisruti* was the best of the lot in terms of literary merit, she herself has always been partial to *Subarnalata* as it addresses her time and narrates situations that she herself has witnessed. It is more the story of her own time. In her reminiscence titled *Jaa dekhi, tai likhi*, Ashapura Devi writes that through all the storm and stress that her personal life as well as her society has had to brave, she had never stopped writing.

Society has undergone changes, the mentalities of the members of the society have also undergone changes. Unavoidably, these changes have been reflected in my writings as well. So, it may appear at times that my writings display an inner contradiction. But actually I have written exactly what I have actually seen. [...] I have never attempted to step outside my familiar world and that familiar world is absolutely bound by four walls. But even within those confines, I have experienced a tremendous variety of life. How varied were these characters (DEVI 2008: 14).

She reiterates over and over again that she has only seen the world outside through a window, from a distance. She has always stayed imprisoned within the four walls of first her parents' house and then her in-laws' house. She comments on how she used to feel upset seeing that male children were consistently given preference and the girls were generally ignored. But they never dared to protest because girls were not even allowed to speak up in front of elders. And this anger, frustration and helplessness in the face of such rampant injustice used to keep mounting within the clammed up souls. These silent protests had finally been vented in Ashapura Devi's novels and shorts stories. As Jasod-

hara Bagchi writes in her article on *Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal*:

On the fragile shoulders of the girl child lay the burden of keeping the patriarchal structure of the caste Hindu family in place. Her upbringing was that of a good well-protected 'bhadramahila' encouraged to play feminine games, read books suitable for girls and discouraged from physical activity and from developing a spirit of adventure. An elaborate code of socialization was thus devised for the girl child to ensure that she fitted into the patrilineal, patrilocal family structure of caste Hindu Bengal (BAGCHI 1993: 2214).

Ashapura Devi's Satyabati has to shoulder this responsibility. Bagchi has pointed out that the girl child actually begins to face discrimination at home, within her family, which she calls the "most vulnerable point in a woman's life" (BAGCHI 1993: 2214). Satyabati, the protagonist of *Pratham Pratisruti* is the epitome the frustration and anger which such young women faced rampantly. She is the rebel spirit that every girl dreamt of being but could never master enough courage to achieve. Ashapura Devi says that she has created rebel protagonists as a medium of protest; but that protest is not violent in nature, that voice of protest has rather sought to understand and explain and rationalize. But she also clarifies that this rebel protagonist is not actually modelled on her own life, but rather on lives she has seen around her, heard about. The world, the society she depicts, are very well her own, but the people are shaped by her diverse acquaintances, close ones and distant ones. An eminent historian Tanika Sarkar has addressed the plight of these women:

The woman, however, was the metaphor for both the unviolated, chaste, inner space and the possible consequences of its surrender. There is something like an obsession with the signs of that final surrender, the fatal invasion of that sacred space: giving up of sindur,² betelnut,³ deference towards husbands and in-laws, religious faith; aping of foreign fashions and insistence on a greater leisure time for herself which might be mispent in reading novels and developing a discordant individuality [...] the westernised, tea-drinking, novel-reading, mother-in-law baiting wife as a kind of a folk devil on whom are displaced all the anxieties and fears generated by a rapidly changing, increasingly alien social order (SARKAR 1987: 2014).

These are the women who moved Ashapura Devi and prompted her to pick up the pen to fight for their cause. In the prologue to *Pratham Pratisruti* Ashapura Devi has written:

² Sindur is a traditional Indian red or orange-red coloured cosmetic powder, usually worn by married women along the parting of their hair or as a dot on the forehead.

³ Betelnut is popular — both in India and some other parts of Asia — psycho-stimulant, mostly consumed with a mixture of other substances placed in the mouth (i.e. betel leaf, slaked lime, tobacco etc.).

History is all about the breakups and formations in the external and material world. History becomes articulate when the background reveals the restless play of light and shade. This provides inspiration, excitement for those who come later. But so these breakups and refashionings not happen within the confines of the dimly lit homes? Epochs, society and attitudes have been changed from within the confines of the home. And if one has the eyes to see, one can spot the credit accrued. Yet standard history remains indifferent to this second category of happenings, the changes within the four walls of the home. The home had always been neglected. This story is about one of the unknown women of Bengal, who has from the confines of the ignored/neglected household, dared to keep a promise. If this canvas has truthfully presented even the minutest and most insignificant detail of day to day life, of promises kept, I will feel my efforts have not been in vain (DEVI 1988a: *Prologue*).

Such a clarification of her agenda enables the reader to proceed along the narrative and get a sensitive insight into the plight of the woman in Bengal. The portrayal covers women both in a rural and an urban setup, thereby discouraging criticism on the basis of a one-sided interpretation. Ashapura Devi's treatment is on the whole quite multidimensional and addresses numerous social, religious, academic issues and successfully raises a series of questions in the minds of the reader. The trilogy has gained tremendous popularity mainly on the basis of this thought-provoking capacity. They prompt the reader to know, to think and also to empathize, creating a pulsating link among the author, the protagonists and the readers.

The numerous Bakuls and Paruls of today's Bengal are backed by the history of revolutions over years. It is the history of the rebellion carried out by the mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers of these Bakuls and Paruls. They were not many in number. There were only one or two of them. They have gone ahead on their own. They have moved ahead, crossing over craters and marshes, mounting rocks and stones, pulling out brambles on their way. Again, one more such person has arrived; and has taken up the baton from there. This was how the road was made; the road along which Bakul and Parul are now moving ahead. The Bakuls are also toiling hard. That they have to anyway (DEVI 1988a: 3).

It comes as a great shock to all the womenfolk when they realize that the eight year old Satyabati, who was still residing in her father's house after getting married a year back, could actually compose rhymes. In response to Satyabati's question as to whether she could compose rhymes, her cousin and playmate Punyabati commented with sufficient seriousness — "How can you even ask something like this? Are womenfolk supposed to compose rhymes?" (DEVI 1988a: 22), staunchly aware that women in their society could definitely have nothing to do with alphabets — that was clearly a male privilege. Satyabati retorted in a very spirited manner:

Who told you that they cannot? Woman–woman–woman as if women are not born in their mothers' womb — as if they flow in unwanted with the flood. If you are so obsessed with what girls can do and should not do, please don't come to play with me any more (DEVI 1988a: 22).

Mokshada, the conservative widow entangled in all kinds of social norms was aghast and predicted that this Satyabati would someday definitely blacken the family name. Later in the novel, we come across Satyabati's cousin Neru practicing handwriting on *Taalpaat*, a sheaf of palm leaves. When Satyabati wants to see what he has been practicing and snatches at the sheaf, Neru rolls his eyes and scolds her for having touched those palm leaves. That too, apparently is clearly a male prerogative. Satyabati is unfazed and replies with confidence — “I have touched it, so what? I have offered my prayers to Ma Saraswati⁴ before laying my hands on them” (DEVI 1988a: 102). Neru keeps on arguing that offering prayers to the goddess cannot possibly absolve her of all her sins. He goes on to explain that women daring to lay their hands on palm leaves are known to turn blind. Satyabati comes up with an interesting response to this. She asks him how come all the women in the city of Kolkata who are learning to read and write, are not losing their eyesight. Neru's invincible logic is that “God has decreed that all the good work will be done by men, and all the menial jobs are to be performed by women” (DEVI 1988a: 103). This apparently innocent exchange between the cousins show us the widening gulf that separated the rural women and the urban women. The contribution of the Brahmo Samaj⁵ in this context is worth mentioning. It also shows us how education remained way beyond the reach, and even the dreams of the rural woman. In this context Jasodhara Bagchi comments:

The marriage of the upper caste Hindu girls at a very early age meant that the world of 'new education' that is, western style colonial education was closed to the girls of the upper caste Hindu society, which was also the socially upward mobile class in the British port and capital city of Calcutta. Since amelioration of the condition of the girl child was one of the main social agenda of this class, educating the girl child also became a major item of reform. The rich paradox of the personality of Vidyasagar comes into play here. If ever there was an intellectual who donned the robe of a traditional Brahmin (crop, knot and all) it was Vidyasagar, yet his educational programme partook of the western bourgeois liberal ideology that aimed at a self-fashioning symptomatic

⁴ The Hindu Goddess of Learning.

⁵ One of the most influential religious and social movements responsible for initiating the Bengal Renaissance and the making of modern India. It was formed in Kolkata in 1843 by Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846) by merging his Tattwabodhini Sabha with the Brahmo Sabha founded in early 1930s by Rammohan Roy (1775–1833).

of a hegemonic class. True to his propensity to sanctify all social acts through shastric injunctions, he invoked the authority of the most stringent of lawgivers on women, Manu, to sanction the education of the girl child (BAGCHI 1993: 2215).

Satyabati's situation was not a stray one, but one which illustrates well the usual plight of the girl-child. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's attempts at empowering women through education was yet to reach the interiors of rural Bengal. Education did not find an easy access to women-folk across all strata of society. Aspiring young women were even given to understand that education would result in early widowhood (BASU 1989: 66). Jasodhara Bagchi has written in this context:

It was also supposed to encourage women in becoming immodest, indisciplined and un-controllable, especially when it became clear to the patriarchs that western education and school as the recognised institution of learning had come to stay [...]. The basic fear was that of girls losing their submissiveness through education (BAGCHI 1993: 2217).

Satyabati proudly claims that not only does she not hesitate to touch a *taalpaat*, she can even write on it. The others react as if they have been bitten by a snake. Basking in the attention she has acquired, Satyabati dipped the pen holder in a pot of ink and in bold letters printed a few Bangla words on the *taalpaat*. Then she raised her hands in prayer to some unknown entity and went on to announce that this was not all, she could actually write many more words. Neru, the male cousin was extremely agitated. He just could not figure out how she performed this task so effortlessly while it appeared to be perfectly impossible for him. When they asked Satyabati where she learnt it from, she casually let out that she had picked it up herself since who would ever bother to teach her? Because she did not have access to ink, she used to make a paste of leaves and use that sap and the stick from palm leaves to practice writing. The cousins are still worried that Satyabati would be earning the wrath of the Gods since she had dared to touch a pen and ink in spite of being a woman. There too Satyabati comes up with a strong logical response: "how can learning ever lead to sin? Isn't Ma Saraswati herself a woman? Doesn't she hold in her hands the four *Vedas*, the ultimate among all scriptures?" (DEVI 1988a: 105). The elders in the family decide to go to Satyabati's father since they cannot allow this young girl to go against what all scriptures decree. Contrary to their expectation of very severe punishment, he encourages her to hone her literary skills further and offers to coach her daily. Satyabati's incessant tears express her gratification. She confesses that her aunt has told her how women in Kolka-

ta have access to education. Faced with her father's query as to why women should at all need education, Satyabati retorts: "if they receive education, they would at least be able to read the *Rāmayaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and other *Purāṇas* on their own, without having to depend on others" (DEVI 1988a: 109).

Ashapura Devi ardently believed that society and literature complement each other. She says that her agenda behind creating the character of any rebellious woman, has always been to create a medium of protest (DEVI 2008: 18). She has tried to express through her writings all that has brought her pain and suffering, has raised questions in her mind. Another interesting point which she makes is that, in her days, 'rebellious woman' was a more acceptable term as the notion of 'women's emancipation' was not in vogue at all. She wonders what 'emancipation' or 'freedom' actually means in the context of women. Does she also suggest that in many cases women themselves are to blame since unless one can give up 'attachments', one cannot really break free? Throughout her trilogy, we come across situation where women become the greatest hindrance to their own emancipation, because of their fear of what society would say, fear of promised punishments for the 'sinners' and mainly because of the darkness within their minds. On many occasions they are not even aware of their 'lack of freedom', they are so completely initiated into a male dominated, religious dogma ridden cocoon.

Satyabati's husband Nabakumar has an enthusiastic tutor Bhabatosh Biswas who has learnt English in Kolkata. Bhabatosh inspired Nabakumar to learn English and has advised him that proficiency in English is going to ensure employment in Kolkata where the British masters are in dire need of local youths proficient in English. Kolkata, or the 'city' is projected as an epitome of 'freedom', 'emancipation' and 'change'. Things move as per the tutor's advice and having spent a number of years in the household of dominating in-laws who fail to break Satyabati's spirit, finally Nabakumar gets a job in Kolkata. The decision to move to the city raises numerous eyebrows as people marvel at both Satyabati's courage as well as her shamelessness. Finally, along with an excited and enthusiastic Satyabati and two infant sons, Nabakumar arrives in Kolkata. Once they settle down to their new life in the city, and the boys start attending school, Satyabati announced that she has decided to take lessons in English from Bhabatosh as well. This results in an immediate reaction from Nabakumar who jumps up in indignation and barks out: "What? [...] Don't overdo things. Do as much as you can handle and no more", to which Satyabati retorts: "I have only said that I want to learn English. I haven't really said that I will put on a gown and go out to

a restaurant to eat" (DEVI 1988a: 259). This is quite an eye-opener to the contemporary reader who is reminded about the extremely conservative upbringing of women even a hundred years ago. It is a reality which we accept with trepidations and amazement. It is a similar situation that Tanika Sarkar refers to in her article on *Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th Century Bengali Literature*:

The well-worn theme of the drain of wealth is recreated within indigenous society: there is a drain within a drain, so to speak, with the wealth, talent and leadership siphoned off from the village — the real India of authentic peasant and familial virtues to Calcutta, the citadel of foreign power, education and culture, where family morality is pulled out of joint, wives lord it over hapless mothers-in-law, and prostitutes are given priority over wives and the cash nexus rules over all (SARKAR 1987: 2013).

The journey to Kolkata was symptomatic of a rejection of the village, of the rural antecedents and an acceptance of all that is immoral, non-traditional and therefore a major suspect. Satyabati undergoes a tough struggle to attain this objective. As a culmination of this struggle which she undertakes for a much larger prospect, Satyabati begins teaching elderly women at the Sarbamangala Paathshala established by their tutor Bhabatosh Biswas. A reference to Satyabati going to Keshab Sen's house to see Ramakrishna Paramahansa provides her with a specific timeline. The war she wages to acquire education and other modes of emancipation for women begins long before the birth of her daughter Subarnalata. Satyabati pins her hopes on this daughter and is deeply upset when her mother-in-law Elokeshi, who never understood or appreciated Satyabati, in an effort to thwart Satyabati's ardent struggle for women's emancipation, gives away her granddaughter Subarnalata in marriage behind Satyabati's back. Satyabati's dream of freedom, of independence remains unfulfilled but is not completely destroyed. She turns back, disregarding the pleas of all relatives and her husband and leaves behind everybody saying that she has to look for answers to the questions haunting her. Later the readers realize that Satyabati's dreams have not died; they stay alive within the helpless heart of her daughter Subarna, who suffers and toils to keep that dream alive.

Subarnalata published in 1967 is about an age which has just gone by, whose impact on the contemporary society is still quite visible. It traces a span which the author herself has lived in. So here the author has faced a bigger challenge where she has had to strike a balance between being an active participant in the happenings and simultaneously providing an objective, outsider's view of the whole situation. The stage is set in Kolkata, in continuation of *Pratham Pratisruti*, but the readers are restricted within

the *Antahpur* or *sanctum sanctorum* of a middle class household. The author is not really concerned about what happens outside in the city and we get only occasional glimpses of the outside world. Subarna is the daughter of Satyabati, fashioned in the same metal, displaying the same spirit, the same grit and determination. She keeps alive the challenge taken up by her mother, her effort to facilitate emancipation for women.

A motif which is intricately woven into the entire fabric of the narrative is the dream of a balcony, a *baranda* (*verandah*), which would provide a glimpse of the outside world, which would usher in a breath of fresh air to counter the stale claustrophobic atmosphere of the household (DEVI 1988b: 4). Early in the novel, the reader experiences Subarna's excitement about the *baranda* which her husband has promised her in the family house that was being built. Nobody in the family understands or appreciates her need for an outlet and the only emotion she manages to generate within the family, is either fear or criticism. She fails to convince even her husband how necessary it is for people to get a glimpse of the outer world in order to broaden their mind. Subarna feels that "nowhere is there a ventilator through which even an iota of the moving air can gain entry into this house [...] there is an absence of ventilator in their understanding as well" (DEVI 1988b: 32). But Subarna yearned for a breath of that fresh air, that contact with the outside world which was full of promise, the promise of freedom. The claustrophobic ambience of her in-laws' house was like a steadily tightening noose around her neck. But once they move to the new house, Subarna discovers that her husband has been taking her for a ride. Deeply saddened and humiliated, she takes a vow: "God, you shall be my witness, I will build a nice house with a *baranda*, I will, I will, I will. When my sons grow up and become self sufficient, I shall avenge this insult" (DEVI 1988b: 11).

Subarna is constantly subjected to derogatory comments about her mother who has left her family and gone away on a pilgrimage. But nobody even has any idea about the enormity of Satya's pain and frustration. Nobody would ever understand why she left in the first place. But the readers realize that the flame that was alight in Satyabati, keeps burning within Subarna, and sings anybody who tries to counter her. Subarna has to fight at every step. Even as she thrashes about in labour pain, she has to fight with Muktakeshi, her mother-in-law, for some clean sheets. She is large-hearted enough to offer all her jewellery to get her sister-in-law married much against the wishes of her husband. She also does not hesitate to confront her husband and talks to him in public, much against the norm of the day, when he tries to hide the jewellery. Subarna is made of a metal which scorches those who fail to understand her but soothes and comforts

many at the same time. A few admire her, marvel at her courage and resilience, while most criticize her because they cannot fathom her. Between Satyabati and Subarna, the background changes. From the depths of rural Bengal, Ashapurna Devi has dragged us into the heart of the city, but then the city does not spell freedom. Inside Subarna's house, the air stands still, stagnant, timeless. Subarna does get her *baranda* finally, but has to wait for a long time for it. She leaves the family house at Darjipara and moves to a new house: "Finally Subarnalata got a south-facing *baranda*. It was right next to the main street. It was a broad *baranda*, with red polished floor and green railings" (DEVI 1988b: 222).

The expansion which she had hoped the *baranda* would bring to the minds of her children does not come easily, and the only person who carries forward her dream and vows never to let it die or be forgotten, is again, like Subarna herself, her daughter Bakul. By this time Subarna is older, more mature but somehow does not reflect the glow that her material gains should have brought to her face. She had tried to bring up her sons but they have turned out to be more like their uncles, carrying deep within them that disdain towards women that was a marker of the father's side of their family. Subarna realizes that even when she has attained the much longed for *baranda*, the object was still eluding the psyche of her sons. Their minds remain as narrow and biased as their father's and uncles' minds.

Within the claustrophobic airless confines of the family house, Subarna finds an ally in a young relative, a boy called Dulo. Dulo supplied her with books which widened the windows of Subarna's mind, helped her to satiate her unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Dulo used to bring these books from the collection of an enigmatic person called Mallikbabu, whom Dulo quoted often: "Till our womenfolk get emancipated and self sufficient, the sorrowful state of our country will not change for the better" (DEVI 1988b: 91). As Dulo recounts descriptions of all the discussions about the crisis of the country held at Mallikbabu's place, a shiver goes down Subarna's spine. These words are right after her heart. They echo her emotions, her fears and her frustrations. But a chance encounter with Mallikbabu leads to a calamity, with fingers being raised at her fidelity. One more window of Subarna's soul gets shut and screwed closed permanently.

Traditionally within the Bengali community down ages, the practice is to buy new clothes to celebrate Durgapuja.⁶ On this occasion, new

⁶ Durgapuja — the annual worship of Devi Durga, the Mother Goddess, widely celebrated in India and in the Hindu diasporas all over the world.

clothes are also distributed among the servants and maid-servants as well as among poor relatives. The part-time maid at Subarna's family house comes and returns the sari the family had gifted her on the occasion of Durgapuja. Her excuse is that in the slum where she stays, they had been forbidden to wear clothes manufactured by the British rulers. Haridasi the maid explains that they had been taught that if they wore clothes manufactured by the British masters, they would be acting against the interest of their own country (DEVI 1988b: 106). Subarna's mother-in-law Muktakeshi becomes livid. She accuses the maid of becoming too big for her boots and harps on how much money her second son, Subarna's husband, has spent on clothes for the servants. But Haridasi remains adamant. She maintains that even if she is not given another sari in exchange of this one, still she will not accept it. She is not even afraid of losing her job and goes on to inform Muktakeshi that out on the streets people were being mercilessly beaten up by the police, but were still screaming *Bandey Mataram*.⁷ The clothes shops were being looted and all the wares were being heaped on the streets and the people were then setting fire to these heaps of clothes. Haridasi describes the roadside lectures that were being delivered to make people aware of their servile status and to urge them to fight for their independence. The worst accusation she comes up with is that the wave of national awareness that was freely blowing in all directions, has not been able to penetrate the walls of this household: "The *Babus* of this family only have blinkers on their eyes and have their ears shut" (DEVI 1988b: 107). The person who was hit hardest of all by this allegation was understandably Subarna. The words kept resounding in her ears, within her head. In fact, Subarna had requested her husband to get clothes manufactured locally, as a mark of protest against the British rule. But Prabodh had not listened to her. So Subarna takes it upon herself to ignite the fire of patriotism within her family. She arranges a small pile of new clothes on the terrace and sets fire to them. This was unimaginable as well as unpardonable. The indomitable spirit stayed alive. Accompanied by her sister-in-law Biraj, she hired a carriage, took along all the children of the family and visited the Swadeshi Mela.⁸

Then the plague came to Kolkata. Hordes of people left the city to escape its clutches and took refuge in the countryside. Subarna offered to stay back to do the cleaning up and cooking for the men-folk, but she

⁷ *Bandey Mataram* — 'I worship my motherland' a patriotic chant extremely popular during the Independence Movement in India.

⁸ Swadeshi Mela is a popular Indian fair displaying locally manufactured goods.

was expecting yet another child, she was packed off to the humble establishment of her husband's younger sister Subala in the countryside. Another interesting twist that Ashapura Devi has played with, is her attempt at showing the city with its nooks and crannies packed with a kind of solidified darkness, a darkness signifying narrowness and blindness, a darkness which belies the notion of enlightenment normally associated with the city. On the other hand, her depiction of rural Bengal, particularly the section where Subarna goes to stay at Champa with Subala, creates a picture of openness, liveliness and contentment.

During this visit, she encounters Ambika, a free soul, somewhat eccentric, distantly related to her sister-in-law. Ambika epitomizes all that was lacking in the men in her family. He is deeply aware of what is going on in the world around them, is clear-thinking and rational and displays a sensitivity that Subarna has always yearned for. They discuss nationalism, they talk about the struggle for freedom that was slowly gripping the country. Subarna wants to hear about the freedom fighters, what they thought, what they planned and how they went about achieving their end. When Ambika teases her about her detective-like interrogation, she retorts without any hesitation whatsoever: "Who else but us women would understand the pangs of slavery? We serve even the servants" (DEVI 1988b: 163). She visits Ambika's house in search of poems, in search of books and is amazed at the collection she stumbles upon. Subarna gets drawn into a dream world — a world comprising of rhymes, of poetry, of books, of words, of thoughts. The strong nationalistic feelings conveyed in the poems composed by Ambika bring tears to her eyes and at the same time enrage her. In Ambika's words echoing the spirit of nationalism, in the words inspiring a fight for independence from the clutches of the British rulers, Subarna finds an echo of the pain and suffering endured by all womenfolk — their lack of independence, their silent sufferings, their pains and frustrations as the downtrodden beings (DEVI 1988b: 182).

Kana Basumisra in her essay called *Antaranga Ashapura* comments that the persona of Ashapura Devi constantly peeks out of Subarnalata's character (BASUMISRA 2009: 19). Subarna belonged to a time when it was taken as an offence if women even stepped out of the house. It was then unheard of that a mother could wish to educate her daughter and not agree to get her married at a very young age. It was even more unprecedented that the mother would leave home as a mark of protest when that daughter is married off without her knowledge. Subarna herself could never really adjust herself to the narrow-minded insensitivity of her in-laws' household. She never ceased to protest and kept up an ef-

fort to rationalize with people around her. In the process, she won some and she lost some. She was at the core of many family feuds, many of the storms that brewed in that household. As Ashapura Devi herself had said, Subarna's mother-in-law Muktakeshi was created somewhat in the lines of her own mother-in-law, who got irritated whenever she sat down to read something apart from the *panjika*.⁹ However, she has also clarified that unlike Subarna's husband Prabodh, her own husband has always been extremely supportive (BASUMISRA 2009: 20). At the end of the day, it becomes apparent that Ashapura Devi was primarily a writer who mostly focused on social reformation; she used her pen to lash out at injustices meted out to women.

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Ashapura Devi's trilogy quite effortlessly covers a span of a little over three generations and portrays a touchingly realistic picture of the evolution of the Bengali women over this period of time. While Satyabati's life was not really based on Ashapura Devi's own experiences, and drew mainly from the extensive research into historical, sociological and literary documents pertaining to that era, Subarnalata's life was sketched largely based on her personal experiences and those of the contemporary women around her. During her young days, Ashapura had seen the insufferable agony of and helplessness of women kept confined within four walls. She had seen how their happiness rested on a thorny bed of neglect and insult.¹⁰

In her trilogy, Ashapura Devi has voiced the pain and concern of numerous women from both the rural and urban corners of Bengal. One main reason behind the immense popularity experienced by this trilogy is that women across cultures have been able to identify with her characters and have encountered an understanding and appreciation that they have been looking for over a long period of time. Many have wondered, "how did she know about my experiences?" It is true that the situation has changed both in the rural and in the urban areas in Bengal, but the relevance of Ashapura Devi's creation has not diminished at all. She has raised a question which many ponder over even today: has the situation of women really improved? Can we say for certain that in today's modern world, where women are 'successful' and are often reach-

⁹ *Panjika* is an almanac or calendar marking the religious events for the Hindu community in India.

¹⁰ Cf. BASU 2009: 31.

ing 'the top', they are not actually landing from the frying pan into the fire? This is a question which haunts many of us and Ashapura Devi's writings have further kindled that fire. She puts the blame squarely on 'modernization' (DEVI 2008: 12), pointing out that it is not only women, but even society, art, culture, literature are all being held hostage in the vice-like grip of modernization which robs them of their uniqueness and thwarts the spirit of creativity.

In Subarnalata's anguish Ashapura Devi has captured the anguish, helplessness and frustration of thousands of women in colonial and post-colonial Bengal. They lived in a world where 'emancipation' was a vice attributed to the white skinned masters and the native women were not supposed to dream of any such independence. Their lot was born to provide, to suffer, to sacrifice and then to drown into oblivion. After bringing up her sons with what she thought was the right kind of education, they disappoint Subarna and offer no help in the education of the two young sisters Parul and Bakul. In fact, all they can offer their mother is the standard taunt and disdain that women were traditionally being subjected to. When Ambika is released from the jail and comes to Kolkata to meet Subarna and her family, he faces tremendous insult. Subarna tells him:

As it is, the sins committed during previous births have led to my being born as a Bengali girl, and further sins have thrust me in this household of 'saints'. What more do you expect? Actually it is you people who should be saluted, you who have neglected your personal welfare, and have made an effort to dispel the shame of the country (DEVI 1988b: 275).

Subarna writes about her experiences, her dreams, her sufferings and is audacious enough to try and get these writings published. The inexperienced publisher and the lack of editing leads to a disaster, and the volume which is to be the harbinger of some kind of emancipation, instead becomes a butt of ridicule and brings the aspiring author further embarrassment. In a final act of frustration, towards the end of the novel, Subarna lights a fire on the terrace and the hungry fire devours all her literary endeavours, all her imagination, her dreams and her creations. This fire brings back memories of an earlier occasion when a similar fire had burnt to ashes the clothes manufactured by British companies. This time the fire is lit more purposefully, even more deliberately and is fuelled by the ridicule, taunt and contempt of a husband and of sons she had taken great pains to bring up properly and provide with proper education. The fire is lit out of the realization that her efforts have all failed, that the sons have not really grown up to be sensitive human beings. The fire consumes yellowed sheaves of paper with scribbings all over them,

bunches of exercise books telling the story of a woman, one among many who throng the villages and cities of Bengal down generations (DEVI 1988b: 341). Out of these ashes rise another soul, the youngest daughter Bakul, who says at the end of the novel:

Mother, dear mother. I shall find all your writings that were burnt out and lost. I shall find all those writings that never saw the light of the day. I shall convey to the sunlit earth the tale of the silent trauma of the world of darkness (DEVI 1988b: 396).

Bakul is the youngest among the off-springs of Prabodh and Subarnalata. She is the mute witness to all the sufferings and insults that her mother had to put up with during her lifetime. She is a neglected soul, uncared for by others, often even forgotten. She is the one for whom Subarna's death creates the biggest void. She is the one who feels that there was so much more her mother could have shared with her. Through Bakul's eyes, Ashapura Devi has captured the ever-changing view of the world around us. Continuing the tradition of women using the pen, keeping alive the tradition of Satyabati who leaves behind a long letter for her daughter Subarnalata, of Subarnalata who spends all her life writing, only to set them to fire out of frustration, Bakul also writes, but ironically she writes for she has to publish. Bakul has her publisher breathing down her back. Her words are in demand. They are not always full of sound and fury, but they do signify something important. They signify the fact that women have finally arrived.

Bakul writes under the pen-name of Anamika Devi. Bakul's life has been easier than her mother's. She hasn't had to struggle for every right. She is the epitome of the emancipated woman. Bakul displays a remarkable objectivity in her perusal and analysis of the life around her. She focuses on diverse aspects of life and critiques them without fear, without hesitation. In her we experience an amalgamation of the spirits of Satyabati and Subarnalata as she acknowledges the changes in society, while commenting alongside that life is becoming far more complicated with advancement of civilization. Between themselves, Bakul and Parul voice many concerns; concerns about the situation of not just women, but the threats and fears facing mankind in general. Their approach and reactions are more contemporary, more in tune with the people we encounter in everyday life. Ashapura Devi has herself summed up her literary endeavours quite succinctly in her foreword to *Subarnalata*:

Social scientists record the history of the evolution of society. In my narrative, I have only tried to capture a rough sketch of that evolution (DEVI 1988b: *Foreword*).

Indira Chowdhury further comments:

As a woman writer, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Ashapura contributed to the construction of female subjectivity by productively deploying the tensions within dominant representations of motherhood in an earlier period. Far from suppressing representations of the deviant mother, as the nationalist narratives of progress tended to do, Ashapura's novels can be read as emphasising the possibility of deviance precisely because the parameters which framed the idealised, glorious other failed to provide the conditions within which such an exacting ideal could be achieved. In historicising Ashapura's location we are better able to understand why she represents the predicament of her heroines in this manner. It is only then we are able to appreciate how a 20th century woman writer is able to invert the emphasis of earlier, 'naturalising' ideological constructions and in the process, invest motherhood with a different, although still problematic, value (CHOWDHURY 1998: WS 51).

The colonial period had thrown up a middleclass where in a male dominated world, the woman's position as a servile homemaker seemed to be fixed for all time. Exceptions were there when women emancipated by the Brahmo Samaj and other reformist movements such as Kadambini Ganguly (1861–1923) and others has broken the shackles. But such examples were few and far between. Even Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in *Dena Paona* and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) in *Arakshaniya* could rarely show a way out for the rebellious suffering souls. The latter suffer in silence. It was no use looking at countries outside India. In Imperial Britain itself there was the suffragette movement, specifically conducted by women like Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960). But the reverberations of such movements hardly reached the cloistered middleclass Bengali household. More significant was the freedom movement at home, encompassing women as well. In the mind of the rebellious women, the two were inextricably intertwined as we find in the unfolding of Ashapura Devi's narrative.

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