

Exploration of Feminist Consciousness in Ashapoorna Devi's Novels the First Promise and Subarnalata

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Abstract--- *It is really difficult for a woman to begin her journey towards success as she has to extremely struggle owing to the complexities of life. Each woman is suppressed by the patriarchal society. Though a woman has her own identity and individuality yet she is considered as a 'subaltern' or 'second sex' and her voice is repeatedly silenced by the society. But in the contemporary dynamic world, boundaries are being challenged and the voiceless subaltern of the bygone era refuses to be a mute spectator to the marginalization. Women make themselves recognizable through their acts of retaliation and resistance against the hegemonic power structure. Vivid shades of women's life and their plight is revealed through Indian women novelists' writings. Ashapoorna Devi is one such Bengali woman writer, who has made a remarkable contribution by depicting the determined and individualized women who exhibit strong spirit to fight against all odds. The research paper analyses the narratives of resistance and resilience of women in hegemonic set up in Ashapoorna Devi's novels The First Promise and Subarnalata. The novels present the suppressed position of women and their longing struggle to ascertain identity. The aim of my paper is not only to depict the helplessness, exploitation and violence meted out to the oppressed women, but also to exhibit their never say die spirit against all odds. In this paper, I seek to bring out the significance of these novels in providing valuable glimpses of women's experiences of oppression, protest and awakening of feminist consciousness.*

Keywords--- *Patriarchy, Hegemonic Power Structure, Marginalization, Resistance, Identity, Feminist Consciousness.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ashapoorna Devi (8th January 1909-13th July 1995) is one of the most distinguished writers among the Bengali literature today. She was born and brought up in Calcutta, where her father was an artist and her mother was a housewife, who loved literature. She was not allowed to go to the school because of her conservative family but she would sit with her brothers and listen to them reading, and gradually learned to read and write. She was married off at a young age in a traditional family. She has received many prestigious awards like Rabindra Puraskar, the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, and the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1976. She also won Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 1994. She wrote more than 170 books. Her famous work includes the trilogy: *Pratham Pratisruti* (1964), originally written in Bengali and later translated into English *The First Promise*, *Subarnalata* (1967) and *Bakul Katha* (1974).

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Ashapurna Devi was a feminist in the true sense of the term and an author much ahead of her times. Her writings focus on present-day social issues. She was a sensitive spectator of the changing urban milieu and her writings intimately examine the contemporary Bengali middle class women who seek to examine the existing social evils. She was mainly concerned with the feminist consciousness. The women occupy the central stage in her novels. She was given the name of 'Kitchen Writer' as that was the only place where she got the privacy to pen down her thoughts. She considered education for women to be of utmost importance. Her novels symbolize an endless struggle for women to achieve equal rights, by a spirited protest against injustice stemming from gender-based discrimination. She wrote for the millions of nameless and faceless women, tried to wake them up from their stupor and inspired them to break the shackles of the male hegemony and liberate themselves. Ranjeet Saha writes in the introduction of her translated short story collection, *Kirchiyan* in Bhartiya Gyanpeeth Publications, III ed., 1993, "About Ashapurna's women characters, it is said that they are neither uncommon nor 'a special creation of God'. Then who are they? Are they human copies of the writer herself? No, not that. In a simple and individualistic way, they are the brides, daughters or mothers of our own surroundings. They are not closed behind veils or prisoners in harems or deeper recesses of homes. But, the writer strives to make them break the walls made by men and liberate themselves. Their voices are filled with positive and believable resistance, even while maintaining the dignity of their different roles. Sometimes, they do not come forward, and they fight with themselves. Their fights are not personal.. they don't fight only with husband. brother...lover but with the cruel world of men."

Her works brilliantly portray the emergence of feminist consciousness– their suppression, anger, growing awareness, awakening of conscience, their resistance and rebellion. She desired that men and women should attain same level of consciousness. She wanted women to be able to initiate changes and challenge the system from 'within' and resist to patriarchal ideologies.

In her magnum opus, the trilogy, she covers the life-stories of three generations of women-Satyabati, Subarnalata and finally Bakul, over the changing twentieth century and explores the inner desires and aspirations of her women characters. Gyanpeeth Paperbacks presenting Ashapurna Devi's books wrote, "The writer's world of Ashapurna Devi, is not her own personal world. Rather, it is an extension of home-worlds of all of us. Touched by her pen, all roles, all characters, come alive in front of us - sometimes as a young daughter, sometimes as an adolescent girl and sometimes as a new bride; sometimes as a woman, as a loving mother in whose womb a new world is beginning, sometimes as an aunt and an ageing housewife or as a grandmother or as an old helpless woman watching the changes in the society from a prison cell."

Ashapurna Devi's first novel of the trilogy *Pratham Pratisruti* was translated as *The First Promise* and was published in 1964. She observed in her Preface to the novel:

"But history has invariably overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. That domain has always been neglected. This book is about an unknown woman who was among those who carved out the etchings of a promise from within those ignored interior spaces of Bengal."

Here, she emphasizes that due recognition should be given to the experiences of the suppressed women who were unnoticeable from the histories of colonial society. She continued to write about the process of marginalising

women and their resistance to patriarchal ideologies which lets women challenge the system from 'within'. The novel pays a tribute to the ordinary women of Bengal who faced all the hardships with great valour. It is the story of Satyabati, the pioneer of the first promise of thinking, a courageous girl who learns to read and write on her own, a brave heart undaunted by odds, who breaks all the conventions and becomes a rebel to achieve her identity. She fights to liberate women after surmounting many obstacles and impediments on the way.

Satyabati, the protagonist of the novel, is a powerful female voice whose journey from a 'child bride' to rediscovering herself has been depicted in this novel. The novel begins with an urge to '.....repay the debts to one's grandmother and great grandmother'. It is narrated by

Bakul, the granddaughter of Satyabati. Set up in the social milieu of early nineteenth century, the novel portrays a perfect picture of the colonial Bengal which is on the path of social reforms.

Her father, Ramkali, was an Ayurvedic doctor. He was termed as an outcaste on returning to village after learning Ayurveda. But his knowledge earns him respectable place in the society. So, Satyabati realizes that only education can inspire individuals to liberate themselves in this world. Satyabati had non-feminine interest like reading and fishing which were beyond the understanding of other women of the house. Nothing seems to dissuade her as she says to her father Ramkali: "Huh! As if I fear the dark! Don't I go into the garden when it's very very dark, to count owls by spotting their glistening eyes?" . Eventually this courage of her removes the darkness in many women's life.

Satyabati becomes the victim of child marriage. Her life was transformed at her in-laws place but nothing could change her determination. When Elokeshi, her mother-in-law hits her for not sitting properly while tying her hair, she retaliates, "Why did you hit me". This leaves everyone stunned. Again a similar incident happens and Elokeshi screams, "...Who has seen a married woman with such a sharp tongue!". Her husband, Nabakumar, felt the loss of "a clay doll for a wife". She could not be tamed by anybody. When her father-in-law's nightly outings are revealed to her she boldly resists preparing puja room for him. This incident reveals the strength of her character and also emphasizes the hypocrisy of society which discriminates between actions of man and woman, as women aren't allowed to step out of their home even in the daylight. She displays immense courage when her husband was ailing and despite the obvious ridicule she arranges for an English doctor by selling off her gold necklace with the help of Nitai and Bhabatosh-master, and saved his life.

Ashapoorna Devi presents a contrasting picture of the Indian psyche, by showing the fate of Shankari and Nilambar Banerjee, who are accused of illicit relationship. While he continues to have respectable place in the village but Shankari is referred to as 'unchaste woman' and 'paramour'. Even Sadudi comes back to her husband in middle age and accepts the co-wife for the pleasure of her husband. Elokeshi, Saudamini and Sharada accept the tradition of co-wife mutely. Satyabati was dissatisfied with the restrictive roles assigned to woman. Ashapoorna Devi through Satyabati lifts the veil of the prevalent hypocrisy in the society and constructs women's demands against social oppression.

Being a child bride Satyabati suffers miscarriage and becomes mother of two sons very soon. She strongly desires to experience new world outside village and this becomes very clear after the incidence when she declares, "I

will, will, will go to Calcutta! Just to check out for myself if a woman is struck down by thunder when she steps into the city!”. Satyabati’s leaving village for the city Calcutta is paradoxical for villagers- sinful yet courageous attempt. She emerges as an epitome of new hopes of new beginning among the women of the village.

Satyabati, after moving to Calcutta took charge of everything. Her husband feels intimidated by her strong character and is always in awe of her. He cries out: “Always ready to take a risk! I wonder why god made you a woman instead of a man!” According to male hegemonic power structure, man and power are synonyms since ages. But Satyabati proves this notion completely absurd with the assertion of her strong will and courage. According to her, for being able to take decision one doesn’t need to be a man and this she proves once again by eventually taking up teaching to earn her livelihood. She taught adult women to read and write. She desires to get along with the wider world of knowledge and inspire other women to have their space and self-explore. A space was created for women by a woman.

Social upheavals in the society of 19th century bear a deep influence on Satyabati’s life. She made conscious efforts to become part of the reforms and give new shape to her identity. She idealizes the social reformists like Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar and also doesn’t miss the opportunity to meet Keshabchandra Sen and gets inspired. Reforms like abolition of sati pratha, widow remarriage and woman’s education is like weapons in the hand of unarmed Satyabati. She was extremely aware about the need for education and thus made her daughter Subarnalata study. She instils new hopes in the life of women like Suhashini and Subarnalata by educating them. As far as the social transformations were concerned the work had to commence from ‘within’. Satyabati like a true Indian woman attended to the daily grinds of household meticulously and at also took to her ‘own self into consideration’ and became self-sufficient.

Ashapoorna Devi also touches the sensitive issue like widow remarriage and condition of women on the basis of caste discrimination as well. Shankari, the child widow, who used to live in Satyabati's father's house, eloped with Nagen who belonged to a different caste but their marriage is not successful and she is treated badly by her newlywed husband. He abandons her after hearing the news of her pregnancy. Suhashini is the girl child of Shankari. Her encounter with Satyabati brings new hopes in their life. Satyabati brings them to her house and tries to give Shankari and Suhashini a comfortable life. But even in city a women who has broken caste rules was not accepted and treated well. Shankari's remarriage was also criticized by the society. This brings out the complexity of a widow’s remarriage. It captures the moment of the movement widows led by Vidyasagar along with several members of Brahma Samaj, in compare with her past situation in Bengal when women were bound to live a widow life after their husband's death and had no choice to start a new life. Satyabati is determined to bring change in the life of poor Suhashini by educating and marrying her off despite her virtual widowhood which was given to her by Shankari to save her from the evil eyes of the society, even though she is unmarried. One day when Suhashini asks Satyabati about her whereabouts in the afternoon, Satyabati sees a new woman in Suhashini who could lend voice to her thoughts. She sees her reflection in Suhashini and asserts: “Aren’t women human?” But it’s so futile! You know, it’s so agonizing to be a woman in our country! You will be prevented from doing an honest piece of work at every step!”.

Her hopes were on a new height as widow remarriage had started gaining acceptance in Brahmo Samaj. Even in bad state of health, she goes to meet Master Mashai and convinces him to marry Suhashini. She even manages to find a little educated girl for her son Sadhan's marriage. She emerges as a true fighter at every phase of her life. Her never give up attitude makes her dream possible.

Education is one of the most important backdrops of novel. The novelist tries to instil fresh breeze of change, independence, determination in the life of characters that pursue it. It was the time when its influence is quite evident in the lives of Satyabati who begins teaching illiterate women and Suhashini who becomes a senior grade teacher at Subarna's school, a symbol of 'new' educated woman. It was a belief that if a woman learns to read or write, she must become widow. Neither Satyabati nor Subarnalata becomes widow and that allow them to move further in the way to self-exploration. Their life sows the seed of change whose fruits will be harvested by the future generation.

Subarnalata's grandmother and her father rid off her by marrying her at the age of nine and Satyabati does not know about this plan. Later when she finds out that she has lost her daughter, she simply abandons her family. Her daughter's marriage ironically foils her all efforts of changing other women's life and leaves her shattered. She went to Kashi, to her father Ramkali, on a journey of finding answers to her questions. She educates the female children there. Her independent journey of self-existence begins with the tragic and traumatic end of the novel. Her decision to be self-dependent lays foundation for "a road fit for chariots" on which Bakuls of modern era are smoothly running.

The second novel of Ashapoorna Devi's trilogy is *Subarnalata*, which was published in 1967. Young Subarnalata, the protagonist, is the daughter of Satyabati, the first novel's uncompromising heroine. Ashapoorna Devi herself introduces *Subarnalata*, "Apparently, *Subarnalata* is a life story but that is not all. *Subarnalata* is the story of a particular time, a time that has passed, but whose shadow still hovers over our social system. *Subarnalata* is a symbol of the helpless cry of an imprisoned soul ... sociologists write down the history of a changing society, I have merely tried to draw a curve to depict the change."

The novel is about an age which has just gone by, whose impact on the contemporary society is still quite visible. It is apparently the biography of the 'previous generation to this generation' whose portrait is presented to the readers, a generation that endured many shackles of customs, prejudices, and traditional values. It was a time when women were suppressed by the patriarchal society, felt choked and yearned for fresh air and liberation. It is a novel that mounts a silent but strong protest against the silencing of women by the patriarchal society.

Subarnalata, a young girl child was married off by her grandmother. She loved school and questioned all the rotten practices of the society but she is fated to marry and live among people who disliked her for these thoughts. She yearns to go to school: "I want to go to school. Why nobody is bothered? At least mother should have thought about it. Where is mother?", but her mother-in-law locks her up in a room. Throughout her life she desires to continue with her education. She remains semi-literate but becomes a voracious reader. She tries to speak about the importance of education but it is neglected every time. She holds the same belief like her mother; she questions and speaks against the female marginalization.

Her journey begins when she subscribes to a newspaper in their house which is quite unusual for the family. As she believes that it can give her the knowledge of outside world which is very important for self-development. But this is severely criticized by the male members of the family as they think that it will bring disasters for the family. Then, she starts teaching the children of the family. Within the confines of her house, Subarnalata finds a supportive young relative boy, Dulo. He supplied her with books which helped her to satiate her unquenchable thirst for books and knowledge. Dulo used to bring these books from the collection of Mallik Babu, whom he quoted often: “all the pain and misery in this country will end only if our women learn to read, if they were educated”. These words are right after Subarnalata’s heart. They echo her emotions, fears, frustrations and dreams. But when by chance she encounters Mallik Babu, fingers were raised at her fidelity. One more window of light gets shut for her.

Her little space was ruined by her husband as she was compelled to go to the labour room a lot of times. Unlike her sister-in-laws, who conformed to the laws of patriarchy, Subarnalata demanded equal rights. She advocated for the proper sanitation of the labour room. But the society is not ready to accept any protest or question from a woman, who is not supposed to speak of her own comfort. A woman is treated as a machine to produce children without any complain.

Her sister-in-law, Umasashi, is a symbol of conventional womanhood. She begins to feel entirely irrelevant when Subarnalata appoints a cook in the family. She could never consider herself important in her own right. But Subarnalata is amazed at the muteness of her. She wonders how countless Umashashis spend their whole lives like this. Subarnalata is representative of the new, conscious woman continuously waiting to be unfettered from patriarchal subjugation. She participates in the Swadeshi movement and burns all the new foreign clothes which were bought for Durga Puja on the terrace. This was unimaginable as well as unpardonable. She visits the Swadeshi Mela with the female members of the family and children. She wants to break away all the hindrances of the society imposed upon women.

During the visit to Subala’s, her sister-in law, house she comes in contact with Ambika. He is involved with the Extremist Swadeshi movement, and writes poems. Subarnalata wants to hear about the freedom fighters, as she always wanted an open window to peep outside and have a glimpse of what is happening in the world, beyond the four walls of her house. When Ambika teases her about her endless questions, “You really feel the need to free ourselves from foreign rule?”, and she asserts : “Why? Because I am a woman? If I wasn’t, perhaps I wouldn’t crave for freedom so much.” . She visits Ambika’s house in search of books and is amazed at the collection of rhymes and poetry. She finds an echo of the pain and suffering endured by all women, their lack of freedom, their silent pains in his poems: “those lines might have been written not just for an oppressed nation, but for me— I mean, women like me, denied their freedom, their destiny shaped by others...”.

She desires for a terrace to look up to the sky from her house and breathe fresh air. But she is not allowed by her family as they think that women must stay inside their house and have no contact with the outside world. She asks her husband Prabodh, to build terrace for her in their house but he doesn’t. Deeply saddened by this, she takes a vow: “One day, when my children are grown up, I will build my own house. And that house will have a veranda, just as I want.”. For her, a veranda was a symbol of freedom. She protested in her own way by choosing the oddest

bedroom for her in that house. All the family members considered her mad.

Her dislocation after her marriage raises the question of losing her ties with her roots. But she succeeds in getting her terrace finally: “This house had a long verandah, facing the south...Atleast this one promise Subarna was able to keep.”. But after years when she tells her son Bhanu that she would like to see her childhood school which she had to leave because of her marriage, he finds her crazy and says: “What good will that do? Are you going to go back there?”. He further says, “Tell Baba to take you, I couldn’t go around with a female in tow.”. All the sons turn against Subarnalata for her open speaking. Kanu said: “hearing my mother criticise Grandma and all the others in our old house. So I always thought they were to blame. But now...now I realise where the fault really lies.”. They find her efforts of writing as madness, because for them, a woman should be busy with household chores and should not enter in the world of knowledge. Subarnalata's children also did not understand her and constantly mocked her. They taunt their mother and disdain that women were traditionally being subjected to. Their minds remain as narrow and biased as their father’s and uncle’s minds.

Subarnalata tries to find her own space in her personal diary, in which she writes about her experiences, her dreams, her sufferings and about the condition of the women in the society. Jayavati, her neighbour supplied her with books and magazines through the small hole in the wall. She reads them up in the privacy of her room. She starts writing and tries to re-posit herself in the society with her literary expressions. Her literary endeavour can be seen in the light of the Helene Cixous:

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history— by her own movement.”

She gets her book published in which she writes —“I am a housewife. My only name is Mejobou. I have a mind, a soul, but no one acknowledges my existence.”. Through this book she tries to carve out an identity for herself. But her dream is shattered as her husband and sons laugh at her ideas: “Our revered mother felt she was being neglected, you see.”. They never recognized or appreciated her attempts, rather ridiculed her for the spelling and grammar mistakes. Her family criticized and mocked at her desire to express herself.

In humiliation and frustration, on terrace Subarna lights a fire of the books she wrote, and dies in the funeral pyre she made out. This fire devours all her literary endeavours, dreams and creations. Out of these ashes rises another soul, the youngest daughter Bakul. She makes a silent promise to her dead mother, “I will look for and retrieve every lost word, every burnt letter. I will write your story anew, and tell my dazzling world the history of your silent suffering in darkness and ignorance.” She is the only person, who carries forward her dream and vows never to let her dream of open verandah die or be forgotten.

Subarnalata emerged as a female ideal that becomes the true heir of her mother Satyabati, and soothes her arid heart wounded by these long struggles. Subarnalata also had to face the barriers of patriarchal culture and struggled endlessly to establish her unnamed identity. She isolates herself and sinks into silence. But her silence represents the protest of every woman in those times. Satyabati and Subarnalata wanted to learn and have their individual space and identity. So the South balcony or Kashi give them a space in the nature to resolve their wishes and celebrate

their senses in terms of liberalism. Subarnalata belonged to a time when women if stepped out of the house, it was seen as a sinful act. It was then unheard of that a mother like Satyabati 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. Shivani Vashist rightly points out in her work: “the sensitive and iconoclastic women accept the need for individuality and revolt against the established norms”. Both Satyabati and Subarnalata wanted to come out from social barriers that have been made for women.

In the novel *The First Promise*, Satyabati who was given away in marriage at the age of eight, with “a ring dangling from her nose, rings on her ears and her chiming anklets” continued the struggle for years at every step, battling against family control, mental violence of the kulin polygamy and social prejudices, to build “the road on which the Bakuls and Paruls are striding ahead”. She was not aware that she was making history yet the path was laid. From Ashapurna Devi’s perspective what was needed was a change in the process of upbringing and socialisation. When God created the opposite sexes, in His eyes they were not different, but society created this inequality. Women like Satyabati and Subarnalata were conscious of their marginalisation. Both of them represent a phase in the transformation of the society. Neither of them however finds her own place easily but resists and sacrifices their whole life to let the people understand the importance of women's emancipation and their rights. The novels give the idea of continuing struggle of generations of women.

II. CONCLUSION

Ashapurna Devi’s trilogy covers a span of over three generations and portrays a realistic picture of the evolution of the women over this period of time. She has voiced the pain and concerns of women. Chandreyee Niyogi in her essay *Ashapurna Devi’s Trilogy and the Feminine Style of Writing* comments:

“She wanted to represent women’s aspirations in a traditional society, and the agony of encountering those obstacles to self-fulfillment, which could only have been perceived as keenly as Ashapurna did in her trilogy at a turbulent moment of the reawakening of feminist consciousness.”.

She further writes: “Satyabati does not strike us as a woman of flesh and blood. In the sharpness of her skilled reasoning, in the dazzling brilliance of her intellect, and in her unearthly transcendence of all feminine desires and weaknesses – Satyabati is really an argument embodied. Ashapurna had conceived Satyabati as the instrument of her fierce battle, and an eloquent advocate of her own indictment of gender discrimination”.

Through her works *The First Promise* and *Subarnalata*, Ashapurna Devi wanted to create a space for women where their plight would be voiced and consequently be heard. She traces the evolution of woman as an enlightened and empowered individual struggling against the shackles of discriminatory norms imposed upon her by society. Her works present the sensitization of feminist consciousness that has motivated the subaltern to find their voice.

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