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Plight of Women in Ashapura Debi Novels

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ABSTRACT

Women's subjugation remains a perennial problem all over the world. Women fight for their rights and equality against the patriarchal society through various tools. One such tool is women's writing. Women writers make use of their writings to initiate changes in the societal structure. Feminism endeavours to create a change in the society. "Feminism is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, and as well as the basis for organised effort. The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimisation by the dominating males of the society which leads to woman's subordinate states and their consequent oppression (Lerner: 237). There are different types of feminism such as Liberal feminism, Radical feminism, Existential feminism, Cultural feminism, Rational feminism and so on. Many feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Maria Steward, Betty Friedon, Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchel and Mary Daly had elevated the position of women. But there were certain limitations for the women writers in the past. One such limitation was only the affluent woman could write especially in the 18th and 19th century. Virginia Woolf says, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction".

Keywords: Feminism, existentialist, society, culturalist.

Indian society remains always a patriarchal one. Women play a vital role in household duties and raising children whereas men secured their position as master and lord for women. Whenever

women face problems from men, it is always women who should endure and undergo the oppressions mutely. Women were made to forget their individual identity. This situation changed

gradually when many women came forward to express their views through writings. Writers like Anita Desai, Ashapura Devi, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das and Arundati Roy attempted to change the scenario and empower women in India.

One such woman writer to empower women through her works is Ashapura Devi. Ashapura Devi remains as prominent writer in Bengali Literature and won many accolades such as Jnanpith Award, awarded Padmashree by the Indian government in 1976, Sahitya Academy fellowship in 1994, D. Lit. from universities such as Rabindra Bharati University, Bardhaman University, and Jabalpur University. She has written nearly 225 books. Her woman characters attempt to break the stereotypical characters of Indian housewife. Her fame mainly rests on her trilogy *Pratham Protishruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bakul Katha*. *Pratham Protishruti* (1964) was set two centuries ago in rural Bengal. The heroine Satyabati gets engaged in a childhood marriage and the rest of the novel was about her life and sufferings in her in-law's house. *Subarnalata* (1967) the second of the trilogy is about Subarnalata, the daughter of Sathyabati. This work portrays the middle-class life of Calcutta. The entire novel is about how women's oppression and how they were neglected by the patriarchal society. Devi tries to disclose the trauma and sufferings of women through *Subarnalata*. In *Bakul Katha*, Devi portrays Bakul, the youngest daughter of Subarnalata as an observer and Bakul points out the position of women in the society objectively. Devi herself admitted that although *Pratham Protishruti* received many accolades and appreciations, *Subarnalata* was very personal to her since the character Subarna resembles Asha's character to a large extent. She says, "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 variety of life. How varied were these characters" (Devi 2008: 14).

Devi repeatedly mentions about the preference of the male child over the female child as a common sight in Bengal. Girls were ignored in Bengal household and were not allowed to speak in front of the elders and there were numerous activities that were prohibited for the girl child. One could see a visible discrimination between a girl and a boy child. Girls would be always imprisoned within the four walls and do the household chores. Jasodhara Bagchi states, "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. 'bradramahila' 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 socialisation 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).

Many women identify themselves with the characters of Ashapura Devi. They find a striking resemblance between themselves and Devi's women protagonists. Indira Chowdhury says, "As a woman writer, writing in the 1960's and 1970's Ashapura contributed to the construction of female subjectivity by productivity 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 emphasizing the possibilities of deviance precisely because the parameters which framed the idealised, glorious other failed to provide the conditions within which such an exciting idea 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 when 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". (ws 52)

Many women identified themselves with the women characters of Ashapura Devi. They find a striking resemblance between themselves and Devi's women protagonists. She attempts to bring out the issues faced by the women inside the four walls. She tries to open up about the oppression suppression and the structure of patriarchal society against women. She says, "The numerous Bakuls and Paruls of today's Bengal are based by the history of revolution 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 numbers. They were only one or two of them. They have gone ahead of 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 1988 a: 3).

Throughout her entire life Ashapura advocated about the equality of women and women empowerment. In her essay, "India

Woman: Myths and Reality", she says, "woman need a special kind of self-sufficiency; (this) can come only with the consolidation of female power.

In our society, women often stand in the way of other women's development. This is an inescapable truth... (Any) agitation around the term. Woman's emancipation will not emancipate women, what is needed is power... the power of sacrifice and detachment, the power to liberate oneself from the narrow confines of self-interest, the strength to tear apart that veil of false consciousness and to stand out in the splendour of one's dignity... It is important to remember that the struggle is against injustice and inequality, not against the male sex. If we have to proceed toward a better society it will not do for the two sexes to behave as if we were perpetually on a battle ground... Equal rights can be ensured only when men and women have attained the same level of consciousness". (2008, 2). This article attempts to exhibit Ashapura's fight against the patriarchal society through her daring and challenging heroine Subarnalata. Through Subarnalata, Ashapura endeavours to liberate women and to establish their individuality. Ashapura says, "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 nearly tried to draw a curve to depict the change" (ix).

Subarnalata was born and brought up in Calcutta and has two brothers. Subarna's mother Satyavati strived hard to establish her individuality in the society. Thus, she was the pioneer woman to become the first 'rebel' in the family. Satyavati attempts to break the barriers of the society, that education was meant only for men and she

educated herself to read and write. She also made her daughter and two sons to study. Like Muktokeshi, (Subarna's mother-in-law) Elokeshi too did not allow Satyavati to find her true self. Elokeshi arranged Subarna's marriage with Prabodh at the age of nine. Subarna, as a child, was thus captivated in the cage of Muktokeshi's household. Subarna lived an mundane life for almost thirty years, had eight children and did the household chores all day. She becomes restless, dissatisfied with her life where she was not seen as a soul but merely as a sexual object, and a womb to bore children. Her desire for a veranda symbolises her freedom. She longs to see the sun, the sky, the world where one could witness processions, marriage etc., which connects her to the outer world. But Prabodh, her husband refuses her freedom and in turn mocks at her. He says, "What do you want a veranda for? To stand there in the evening displaying yourself?" (4). Prabodh remains suspicious about his wife's desire for a veranda. Ashapura writes "who know what his wife might do if she could escape to the roof top? What if there were other people – other men – in the neighbouring houses? They would gawk at her, and she would gape at them. Then it would be just a matter of time before she got involved with one of them" (25).

Gloria Watkins describes, "Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behaviour. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause" (Feminist theory: 48).

Ashapura Devi presents that Subarnalata's marriage as a farce and it leads to Subarnalata's destruction both physically and mentally. Prabodh remains cold and indifferent towards Subarna. He craves only to satiate his physical hunger against his wife's wish. Ashapura writes, "This he knew, was his biggest weakness.

He couldn't help being a man. Subarna's tall, youthful body held an inexplicable attraction... There was only one thing Prabodh wanted to do anyway. Subarna looked at her two small children, who still slept in the same room. She could hardly walk out in the middle of the night or do anything that might wake them. So, she gritted her teeth once more and suffered in silence. Well, what else could she have done?" (43). Subarnalata's situation aligns well with Simone de Beauvoir's statement. She says, "Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism". (Beauvoir: 43).

Prabodh remains as an accomplice of patriarchal society throughout his life. Prabodh humiliates Subarna by accusing her of her illegal relationship with Mallik Babu, her book supplier and Ambika Kumar, the Swadeshi fighter. He fails to understand that through them, Subarna tries to ventilate herself from her suffocating house. For Prabodh, only one relation exists between a man and a woman and that is sex. Prabodh considers Subarna merely as a physical object. Prabodh often insults Subarna in front of his entire family during the day and surrenders to her physically at night. Subarna despises love making since there was no love but only lust. Ashapura writes, "In his eagerness to prove his manhood, Prabodh made sure Subarna was kept occupied, regardless of what she wanted for herself. "Why don't you want another child". He fumed one night when Subarna dared to express her own feelings in the matter. "Are you worried about your figure? Of looking older? Afraid other men won't find you attractive? You think I don't know? (37). Thus, he spoke filthy language at nighttime and proved his manhood.

Ashapura reminisces her personal experiences in the novel. She mentions about the discrimination of the girl child and boy child. She says, "From my childhood I have noticed that in our families – I am speaking of our middle-class

milieu – boys and girls are valued quite differently – women are ciphers and men are precious. This used to pierce my heart. But in our times, we did not have the guts to protest, if we opened our mouth before the elders, we would be sent to the gallows! The sorrow, the anger, piled up inside. All those unpronounced protestors of mine have appeared in my writing and figures of rebellious women like Satyavati of PrathamProtishruti. The world of Subarnalata is one that I have witnessed in my childhood... everywhere the male ruled supreme” (xiv).

When a dai was called out for Subarna's delivery Muktokeshi demands that she want only a grandson. The dai says, “I'll take hundred different paan from you if it's a boy” (28). Muktokeshi gets ready to celebrate the arrival of the boy baby. But the celebration stops on the birth of a female baby. Muktokeshi says furiously, “A girl! It's just my luck! Get out of here, BoroBou, don't stand there like an idiot with the conch shell. There is no need to blow it now” (29).

Prabodh's family remains completely devoid of women's privileges and preferences. To talk about women's emotions and priorities were unacceptable things at Prabodh's house. Prabodh many times warns Subarna to behave normally. “Oh, why was his wife always so difficult? How could a mere woman have such impertinence?” writes Ashapura. Subarna and Prabodh belonged to two different worlds. Subarna represents freedom and knowledge whereas, Prabodh stands for domination and oppression. The free spirited Subarna, when placed in the family of detachment and subjugation undergoes trauma and suppression till her death. Prabodh always fails to appreciate his wife's knowledge and curiosity. He never appreciates her wisdom. When Subarna wanted to recite poetry, Ashapura writes, “He threw the book away and a minute later, spoke again. “We've had enough poetry for one night”.

He proclaimed, “As it is, you're never interested in your duties, are you? Come now, I have other plans...” He blew hard on the flickering lamp, making it go out at once. But was it just the room that was plunged into darkness? Didn't Subarna's whole future got engulfed by it” (185).

AshapuraDevi discusses about the pains and agonies of women during childbirth process. Childbirth is unmentionable to the male circle in the Bengali households. Women were prohibited to share their anxieties concerned to the childbirth. Adrienne Rich describes from her bunch of letters in *Of Woman Born* as, “I dare not let my husband in his precarious conditions hear a cry of pain from me, and travail pain cannot always be stifled; and here again the doctor helped me by giving me a sleeping draught to administer him as soon as I felt the pangs of childbirth. Hence he slept in one room while I travailed in the other and brought forth the liveliest boy that ever gladdened a mother's heart” (151).

A small, filthy and dark room is usually used after childbirth in the Bengali household. Subarna detested the society which celebrated motherhood but remained indifferent to the agonies of a mother during the process of delivery. She is very particular about using clean clothes and towels during child labour and this irritated Muktokeshi. When Subarna refuses to use old and torn towels, Muktokeshi reprimands her, “What did you say? You object to these old and torn towels, do you? You're worried about germs, did you say? Well, what should I get for you then – silk sheets and satin covers? What do you think you are, a princess?” (26).

Thus, Subarna fights to uphold the importance of woman's body and tries to establish the fact that her body is not an object where her husband could satiate his lust. Jasodhara Bagchi states, “Women's role in species reproduction has

rendered in order to dominate them” (Bagchi, 1). Women are treated and labelled as a reproductive machine in the patriarchal society.

Every man is inevitably indebted to women for bringing them into this world and nurtures them and this dependency makes men to abuse and dominate women to uphold their superiority. Men try to prove always that women are inferior. Julia Kristeva says, “For a woman, whose spectacular identification with the other as well as the introjection of the maternal body and self are more immediate, such as inversion of matricidal drive into a death-bearing maternal image is more difficult, if not impossible. Indeed how can she be that blood-thirsty fury, since I am she (sexually and narcissistically) She is I?” (Black Sun 28, 29).

Subarna perceives that her sons too take sides with their father and suppress Subarna. They want their mother to be docile and always good-tempered woman. They want their mother as a stereotypical one and they could not accept her individuality. They are completely devoid of compassion and affection and reject their mother. They attempt to dominate her and show their authority over Subarna. When Subarna expresses her desire to visit her old school, Bhanu, her oldest son, sarcastically says, “Tell Baba to take you”, he said carelessly, “I couldn’t go around with a female in tow. For heaven’s sake, ma, where do you get these ideas from? Look at your old school? Ha!” (120). On hearing these remarks, Subarna ponders, “Despite everything she had taught her son he could still shrug his responsibilities away and say, “I cannot have a female in tow”, as though doing something for a woman – even if she was one’s mother – was an act of shame and ignominy. The very word ‘female’ seemed to drip with contempt. Why Subarna wondered helplessly, Why?” (120).

Another weapon which the patriarchy used against women is mother-in-law’s or older women. The patriarchal society always observes the bonding between women. Women are confined within their cocoons and never allowed to have cordial relationships with elder women. The feeling of oneness would urge the women to question the patriarchy set up. So, the intentional attempts by the patriarchal society are created to maintain the discrimination within the female world. Thus, the individual cries of women are kept alone. Ashapura Devi describes, “Because they have to live with so little – they do not hesitate to hurt for very little; because they are deprived, they attack hungrily” (The Book review 19). In Subarna’s case also Muktokeshi remains as a queen of the household. “Muktokeshi was the unchallenged queen of her household. All her children, their spouses, other relations and even, for that matter her neighbours allowed themselves to be treated as her subjects” (5).

Muktokeshi always cuts out the individuality of Subarna and maintains fragmentation between her daughter-in-laws. She also complains about Subarna often, since Subarna does not fit into her confinement. The other sons and daughter-in-laws obey and worship Muktokeshi and they remain as a clay pot without life except Subarna. When Subarna made fun of Muktokeshi’s son jokingly, her sister-in-law Biraj reported to her mother and Muktokeshi exclaims, “Oh my God, Raju, do run and get me some cold water. I think I am going to faint! Tell me, did anyone ever hear of such outrage? In my own house, there she is, arguing with her mother-in-law, answering her back!” (16).

Muktokeshi gets habituated by societies’ practices and thus ceases to think of herself as a woman and always feels unsecured by Subarna’s individuality.

Subarna felt suffocating to live a mundane life with Prabodh. She craves to read and write but her attempts remain futile. Once Subarna read an article about python. Ashapura writes, "A python wound itself around its prey, said the article, and crushed every bone in its body, without causing any disfigurement to its appearance. It reminded Subarna of something..., or someone..." (65).

When Subarna thinks about her life in her death bed, "over the years, memories of her school, the lane where her mother lived; the temple near their house... all dimmed and faded away. What grew stronger and clearer with increasing sharpness was the red mark in her hair. Thoughts of wiping it off now seemed, unreal, impossible". (182). Thus, when Subarna wants to step outside, the red mark in her forehead stops her from her attempts to establish herself in the society. The puzzled and painful questions of nine-year-old Subarna on her marriage were later answered by her mother's letter. The letter is not a sentimental one from her mother but instead talks about the plight of entire Bengali women. Satyavati writes, "Dear Subarna, I have not wept only for my little girl my heart has bled for each one of those thousands of Subarnas who, I know are held captive like you by their own cruel destiny... Although I have not seen you since you were nine, I know in my heart that you have often thought the same things that you have tried to improve not just your own situations but also that of others" (160). Satyavati's motherly affection for Subarna differed from an ordinary mother's love. Satya refused to be a victim against the patriarchal society, and she fights back to alter not only her life but the entire Bengali women. Subarna inherits these qualities from her mother. But Subarna could not fight alone against the patriarchal system. Even in death, she dies merely as Prabodh's wife. Instead of lamenting

her death, people celebrate her death by saying, "What was more, her husband was still alive, and wasn't dying before her husband the biggest achievement in a woman's life?" (204).

Thus, Ashapura's novels portray and exhibit the struggles of women. Ashapura says in her match box, "I always compare women to matchboxes. Why? Because the way matchboxes are – even though they have enough gun powder to set a hundred Lankas aflame, they sit around meek and innocent, in the kitchen, in the pantry, in the bedroom, here, there, everywhere – women too, are exactly the same!" (Devi's Matchbox). Ashapura attempts to mark the arrival of the new women through her heroines. But the 'new woman' struggled immensely to uphold her identity and individuality in the society. Her woman characters become the reformers and they strive hard to profess. But their struggles were criticized and reprimanded by the society. Devi's characters attempt to establish their identities in society but fails most of the time. But their revolt lay foundation for the future generation to mark their identities. Ashapura herself was denied education. Thus, she includes her experiences in her writings. Her characters come from simple Bengal family but in spite of that, they emerge as extraordinary women. Through her women characters, Ashapura raises her voice against the prejudiced society. Her usage of remarkable and decent language fascinates the reader. Truly, Ashapura remains as one among the greatest writers who prophesied the change in the society through literature. To conclude, Ashapura becomes successful in sowing the seeds for the future generation women for their rights. She takes the untrodden path and succeeds. She always responds to the needs of women's education and identity. Thus, Ashapura always dared to imagine and prophecy women's fate from such a world long back.

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