

A Warrior with a Pen: Traversing the Feminist Perspective of Ashapura Devi's *Pratham Pratishruti*

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Literature is judiciously a periphery where human beings have the liberty to express their misery, exultation, protest, moan and laugh irrespective of their race, gender and religion. In simple words through literature every individual gets the power to express her/his own point of views. Literature provides voice to the suppressed and to the vanquished ones too. It is very important for women to have access into the world of literature where they can express their views with the help of ink. If we peep through the windows of history, we will encounter many women writers who were forced to hide their real names in their respective published works as it was a considered a 'crime' or a 'sin' for women of those era to write. Due to this irrelevant dogmatic prejudice many women used the refuge of pseudonyms. The phenomenal novelist Mary Anne Evans had to take the pseudonym of George Eliot in order to publish her novels. Even the Bronte sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Ann the three sisters who are now considered among the greatest novelists of Nineteenth Century first published their works under the male pseudonyms; Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.

In my country, in India the situation was quite disparate. Here in old era women did not have any access to education, though there are names of women from ancient India who achieved quite a feat. In spite of many majestic women in ancient times whose significant contribution to literature is commendable, women suffered due to lack of education and a notion that women will become widows if they learn how to read and write was prevalent during the colonial period.

Ashapura Devi is one of the foremost Indian writers. She has written more than 2,000 stories, 240 novels and 62 books for children. Besides these, she has many unpublished essays and letters. She was born in Colonial India in 1909 and she lived until 1995. Her journey as a writer is a stimulus to every women, specially to women who writings explore the condition of women in the society. Ashapura Devi implicitly criticized the patriarchal social norms through her writing.

To readers like me, she is a great warrior who fought her battle with her pen against the rigidity of patriarchal society. Though her most of works revolve around Indian women, their appeal is universal. It is surprising to learn that this gifted writer never went to school. Her childhood was spent in an extremely conservative family. In her early childhood she was dominated by her grandmother who was an advocate of old customs and traditions. The girl children of their family were not allowed to go out and girl children's schooling was prohibited. On the other hand male children had the access on education. Teachers were employed only for the boys. But Ashapura Devi's love for study was indomitable. It is said, when she was a kid she used to listen her brother's reading and by only listening attentively she had memorized the alphabets. Here learning of alphabets reminds us of those ancient Indian students who used to memorize Vedas only by listening to the readings of Veda. Ashapura Devi's struggle as a learner, a reader and finally a writer is reflected in her writings.

In her writings she advocates women's emancipation from the obsolete and meaningless bondages of patriarchal society. Most of her female characters are strongly and fight against the illogical and sometimes evil fundamental concepts and practice of male dominated society.

Ashapura Devi, a prolific Bengali women novelist explores women's innovation and enlightenment during the colonial and post -colonial period in Bengal. Through her short stories and her trilogy - *Pratham Pratisruti* [The first Promise] (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967) and *Bakulkatha* [The story of Bakul] (1974) she tried to articulate the struggle of women of her era. The trilogy expresses the life of three generations of a same family - Satyabati, Subarnalata (the daughter of Satyabati) and Bakul (the daughter of Subarnalata). And through the character of Bakul she eventually establishes a victory over women's emancipation.

In this paper I would like to focus on *Pratham Pratisruti*. The main character of this novel, Satyabati is a burning embodiment of true feminist, who, throughout the entire novel, remonstrates against gender discrimination and against the irrelevant norms of patriarchal society.

Devi has painted the character of Satyabati, the protagonist of *Pratham Pratisruti*, with the colours of fearlessness and rebelliousness. In this novel we can see that Satyabati is not like other women and children. She is different. She always raises her voice against the oppression of women. She questions each and everything and her mind is full with curiosity since her childhood. She always

tries to break the chains of preconceptions of patriarchal society. In the very beginning of the novel we find her having a debate over her willingness to catch fish using a fishing rod because according to her grandmother, it is prohibited for a girl child to catch fish with a fishing rod. But she denies following this kind of irrelevant rules blindly and asks her grandmother that who has written this kind of illogical rules .

“গামছা দিয়ে ধরলে দোষ হয়না? ছিপ দিয়ে ধরলে দোষ ? ...তোমাদের এইসব দোষের শাস্তার কে লিখেছে গো ?(12).

[Isn't it wrong to catch with a gamcha? Is it a fault to catch with fishing rod? ...Who has written these fault rules of yours?]

Satyabati is not like those docile women who mindlessly follow ancient rules and conducts in the name of convention. Instead she tries to comprehend everything with her own logic. In the entire novel in each and every step she challenges every unjust rule formulated against women. As the novel progresses we again see her rebel intonation when Rashbehari , Ramkali's nephew brings second wife at their home , Satayabati a girl of only eight years , raises her voice against this wrongful act of polygamy . She tells her father that the pain of having a " Satin " (husband's another wife) is really pathetic for women . "

“সতিন মানেই কাঁটা বাবা আর কাঁটা থাকলেই তার জ্বালা আছে বড় বৌ এর প্রাণে এখন তুমি সেই জ্বালা ধরিয়ে দিলো”(68)

Ashapura Devi has herself written - "I have ... written mostly about women because I have seen their helplessness and that is what I know best. Over the years, great clouds of protest have accumulated unexpressed in my mind and Satyabati, the heroine of my novel is the expression of that protest." So, from her own assertion, we come to know the fundamental structure of Satyabati's character. Satyabati was the daughter of Ramkali, a priest and an Ayurveda doctor, her bonding with her father was good but her grandmother was an advocate of orthodox conducts and traditions. It is because of her that Satyabati was compelled to marry at the age of eight. After her marriage she has to face a lot of humiliation but nothing was enough to demolish her uprising entity.

In *Pratham Pratisruti*, Devi has also given us the pathetic view regarding widowhood through the character of Sankari. As the story line progresses we can find that Sankari elopes with her lover Nagen but eventually she is betrayed by him and her entire life is shattered. Sankari also has an illegitimate daughter,

Suhasini. But eventually Suhasini gets the access to education with the help of Satyabati which is the only way to rescue women from the dark well of patriarchal society. Satyabati is well acquainted with the value of education. She is well aware of the fact that only education can provide freedom of thought to women. But despite all her efforts, she fails to educate her daughter, Subarnalata. Nevertheless, this failure of hers fails to kill Satyabati's rebellious spirit and towards the end of the novel as the symbol of protest, she leaves her family and does not keep any contact with anyone as long as she is alive. It was her ultimate answer to all who were involved in the conspiracy.

Ashapura Devi was a victim of a male dominated society, like other women of her time. But instead of following the conventions mindlessly or complaining, she protests through her pen. Her first adult novel, *The Husband's Lover*, was published in 1937, and it dealt with men's shifting and conflicting views of women - as conservative, faithful wives and, at the same time, as stimulating, exotic lovers to flaunt to everyone. Devi has a reputation for portraying powerful female characters. Some critics had dismissed her work by calling her the "kitchen witer." I first fell in love with her in 1968, when I read *Pratham Pratishuti*, the first book in her famous trilogy, which was followed by *Swarnlatha* and *Bukul Katha*. This award-winning trilogy from India's National Sahitya Academy chronicled the lives of three generations of women in Bengal's transforming rural and urban environments during the twentieth century.

To me she is a warrior with a pen. She has produced many rebel women with her ink. Through her women characters she has tried to break the shackles of patriarchal society.

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