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MATRILINEAL INHERITANCE IN ASHAPURNA DEVI'S TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

Down the ages 'history' portrays 'his' 'story' leaving out the story of the womenfolk, as they were considered uninspiring for the posterity and were thus rendered invisible. The traditional Indian society perpetuated patriarchal strictures by restricting women to the domestic space, and their sole purpose in life was to rear children and look after the hearth. Social reformers in colonial India had fought against child marriage and advocated female education, but education for the girl child was a distant reality.

The present paper attempts to explore the trilogy of the pioneering Bengali feminist writer, Ashapura Devi, whose novel covers a span of around three generations and portrays a touchingly realistic picture of the evolution of Bengali women over this period of time. While the first novel, *Prothom Protishruti* (The First Promise) signalled the first promise of the potentiality of an ordinary woman amidst all odds, the second novel *Subarnalata* portrays the story of her somewhat educated and non-conformist daughter giving voice to her struggle and pain through writing, the third one, *Bakulkatha* traces how the protagonist takes upon herself the mantle of voicing her mother's untold stories. The present paper tries to show how the baton of fight for women's emancipation is passed down three generations and the female voice gains honour and recognition from the same society that had admonished her mother and grandmother.

Key words: patriarchy, women, marriage, existence, space.

Ashapura Devi, the first woman novelist and short story writer to win the Jnanpith Award was a bright star in the literary horizon of Bengal, whose writings marked the culmination of the feminist tradition in Bengali literature. Recipient of several awards and recognitions she had as her forerunners, writers like Swarnakumari Devi, Saratkumari Roychowdhury, Anurupa Devi, Nirupama Devi, Shailabala Ghoshjaya and Jyotirmoyee Devi and surprisingly, though most of these writers did not receive a formal education, they went on to be creative writers par excellence. Ashapura Devi had a questioning mindset and she herself admits that most of her writings were the outcome of such questionings. To the woman enmeshed in a semi medieval stratified existence, she became an epitome of success to be emulated. Married off at the young age of fifteen, into a semi-rural extended family, she was deprived of formal schooling but not education. She had inherited

the reading habit of her mother, read whatever was available to learn, and possessed an extraordinary memory. When her family shifted to Calcutta, she had the privilege of a supportive husband, and a nuclear family.

In this trilogy, the author speaks from the point of view of a narrator and analyst and reconstructs and examines the past mainly through the lens of middle class values prevalent in colonial India prior to independence. The first two novels deal with the novelist's engagement with the social changes brought about in the lives of women through reformism and nationalism and their different negotiations with this. The third novel presents the discernment of the end to which those changes seemed to be impacting Bengali woman and her disappointment about the nature of 20th century liberation.

In her treatise on Modern Feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft states:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (Wollstonecraft, 1997, 586).

She points out how a girl child is indoctrinated into believing that the sole purpose of her life is to master the household chores and be confined to the domestic space.

Prothom Pratishruti was set almost two centuries 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 home. Her gendered identity relegates her to the confines of home which is suffocating for her. Such images of confinement are used recurrently in the novels to portray the plight of middle class women and differentiate them from men:

"Men are not bound. They don't marry if they don't want to. They leave their homes if they want to. No criticisms. For the cursed womenfolk every way is closed. ... Women are prisoners, condemned to futile struggles inside cages". (Devi, 1988b: 288-9).

Ashapura Devi observes that she has created rebel protagonists as a medium of protest; but that protest is not violent in nature that voice of protest has tried to understand, explain and rationalize. She also clarifies that this rebel protagonist is not modelled on her own life, but rather on lives she has seen around her, heard about.

Her treatment is quite multi-dimensional and addresses numerous, social, religious, academic issues and raises a series of questions in the mind of the readers. The women folk in Satyabati's in-laws house are taken aback by her tomboyish attitudes. Once when she is questioned by her playmate, Punyabati how she dared to compose rhymes, she retorts back:

"Who told you that they cannot? Woman, woman, woman as if women are not born in their mother's 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 anymore." (Devi, 1988, 22).

The nine year old Satyavati challenges the ideology of the male chauvinists by taking recourse to literacy as a tool to protest against injustice. She composes rhymes about the villager Jatadharan -- who beats his wife till she becomes unconscious—and roams around the village chanting them with her playmates:

The Elephant footed Jata da – there he goes the blighter!
May a toad kick the back of this stupid wife-beater!
Jata, Jata's really gross, he's an abuser like like no other!
Watch the fun, for now he'll run, here comes the wife's father! (Devi, 1988a, 31).

The villagers thus witness a girl child's protest against domestic violence. As morning shows the day, Satyavati's behavioral attitude since her childhood was announcing the arrival of a 'new woman' with a voice to speak against the injustice meted out to the marginalized womenfolk in her society.

Once her male cousin Neru rebukes her for daring to touch the *Taalpata*, on which he was practicing writing, saying "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 1988,103). The elders go to her father as they cannot allow this young girl to go against what all scriptures decree. Contrary to their expectation her father encourages her to hone her skills in education, but his progressive mindset cannot stop his daughter's early marriage.

Satyabati's husband Nabakumar had an enthusiastic teacher named Bhabatosh Biswas, who had learnt English in Kolkata. He inspires Nabakumar to brush up his skills in English so that he gets a job in Kolkata. Things move as per the tutor's advice and Nabakumar and Satyabati move to Kolkata alongwith her two infant sons. Once settled there, Satyabati tells Nabakumar about her decision to learn English from Bhabatosh as well, and doesn't pay heed to his scornful rebuttal.

As a culmination of her struggle to shrug off the rural antecedents, she begins teaching elderly women at the Sarbamangala Pathshala established by their tutor Bhabatosh. 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 hope on this daughter. The nurture of daughters in a patriarchal society involves a kind of love fundamentally different from the male version of mother's love. Adrienne Rich considers this love as courageous mothering which can enable the daughter to come out of the shackles of bondage and forge a new existence. Rich states:

The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand the sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females.... It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim: and go on from there. (Rich, 1976, 246).

Satyabati is deeply upset when her mother-in-law Elokeshi, who never understood Satyabati's ardent struggle for emancipation, gives away her granddaughter Subarnalata in marriage behind her back. On the day of her daughter's marriage, she bows out of her familial relationship and Subarnalata does not see her mother again. Satyabati's dreams are shattered and she turns back disregarding the pleas of her relatives and husband, saying that she has to look for answers to the questions haunting her. Later the readers realize that her dreams have not died; they stay alive within the helpless heart of her daughter Subarnalata, who suffers and toils to keep that dream alive. She is fashioned in the same metal, displaying the same grit and determination and keeps alive the challenge taken by her mother to facilitate emancipation for women. Satyavati renounces conventional mothering and engages in the mission of educating women. Her physical absence does not wipe out her traces from her daughter's mind. She remains as an epitome of courage, self-respect, and will-power.

Satyavati's letter to her daughter Subarnalata forty years after forsaking her makes her ecstatic. The letter was very unusual in the sense that rather than being personal, it was an enquiry into the condition of Brahmin women in the then Bengal. She writes:

Dear Suvarna, I have not wept only for my little girl. My heart has bled for each one of those thousands of Suvarnas who, I know, are held captive like you by their own cruel destiny.... Although I have not seen you since you were 9, I know in my heart that you have often thought the same things, that you have tried to improve not just your own situation but also that of others. (Devi, 1988b, 160)

It is this extraordinary mothering that differentiates her from the average mother of her time. She refuses to be cowed down by the rebukes she encounters in her fight to change the lives of young Bengali women including her daughter. Subarnalata inherits her mother's intellectual prowess.

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. She 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 scribbles 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, like a phoenix, rises 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, 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. She has her publisher breathing down her neck. Her words are in demand. But the menfolk in the family try to suppress her urge for creativity.

Bakul writes under the pen-name of Anamika Devi. Her fame as a writer does not make her apathetic to the cause of the subjugated women of her time. Her 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 who 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. *Smritikatha* thus presupposes a modern woman writer who can speak about herself and her relationships without guilt and shame. Metaphorically, the umbilical cord of Bakul is not severed from her mother, Subarnalata, nor is the latter's severed from her mother Satyavati. Bakul retells the stories of the past to the women of her generation and thus becomes the new woman connecting the past to the present, inspiring the young generation to create a female bonding across cultures thereby carrying forward the matrilineal inheritance.

In an interview Ashapura Devi states,

"I have been writing for quite sometime. During this period, a myriad of changes have taken place about in our country; so much of our society and so much of our thinking have changed radically. The old values are being rejected; newer ones are taking their place. And how easily much of the life-style, customs, and ideas are altering! Yet, at one time, it seemed impossible that they could have changed at all. Literature cannot sit still. It has to keep pace with the moving current of life." (Bose, 1976).

In a powerful move, Ashapura Devi makes the woman writer speak, with rare courage, as the subject, without waiting for the male writers to write about her as a passive object of oppression. Women writers of many years to come are thus present in Suvarna's self and text. *Prothom Pratishruti* and *Subarnalata* depict how communal honour was judged in terms of control over female sexuality: child marriage; consequent passing of this right of female sexuality from the paternal to the marital family; negation of patrimonial rights; gaining new status only by begetting sons; and an active matriarch colluding in enforcing patriarchal norms. Jasodhara Bagchi observes:

The community's control over female sexuality lies at the centre of patriarchy. Female sexuality is as much loaded with the semiosis of woman's social existence as by her private familial one. The semiotic load, taking the garb of culture, called upon to contain the so called 'natural', 'biological', 'overflowing', 'turbulent', female sexuality was one of the chief makers of 'class' boundary of respectability. (Bagchi,1997,78).

Selfhood to Ashapura Devi is a metaphor of positivism which signifies linkage between the individual and the collective. She situates her characters in a dialectic between autonomy and community and foregrounds the importance of affiliation even as she accepts the differences. Her protagonists take up their positions as subjects in the existing order and then strive to create a new one. While the majority of women internalise themselves as objects and accept their plight with utter resignation, those endowed with the power of mind and intellect, recreate their feelings in thoughts. They transform from being objects to potential subjects by coalescing their woeful experiences and their spontaneous resistance to it, thereby reconstructing their own self-identity. Thus they become forerunners of socio-cultural changes.

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