



## **‘Women’s Question’ and Socio-Political Scenario: Re-reading the Three Generations in Ashapura Devi’s Satyabati Trilogy**

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### Abstract

The paper is a study of Ashapura Devi’s *Satyabati Trilogy* in English translation to locate the women’s question of nineteenth century Bengal. The polemics of the paper has been divided into sub-sections to highlight the thematic conflict as well as to focus on the concerns of the time which ranged from women’s education, relationship women shared with each other to the reforms that were carried out from the domestic quarters by the women to foster their emancipation as well as that of the nation’s. Interrogations regarding the child-bride form a rich section as the colonial Hindu system had wittingly or unwittingly entrusted her with the burden of maintaining of the native patriarchal structure. Among the middle class household the *shishu-kanya* (girl child) occupied a major concern as she must become a *bhadramahila* (gentle woman) in future and adhere to the customs of maintaining respectable and orderly demeanour and decorum. Perusal of relationship between mother and the daughter would bring the paper to a resolution and in this respect the works of Adrienne Rich have been looked into.

The narrative revolves around the rebellion that was started by the grandmother, Satyabati to reform the dilapidated condition of women in home and at society and is carried on by the granddaughter, Bakul in the fashion of carrying forward the matrilineal inheritance. Throughout the saga the glorification of motherhood and the burden of being dutiful daughter and wife has been demolished to bring forth the individual role, of which being a daughter, wife and mother was only a part to the woman’s identity. A section is dedicated towards the minor female characters of the novels to portray their life struggles and how they nurtured deep bonds of diverse female relations. That harmony could reign between co-wives and sister-in-laws was unthinkable to the patriarchy as a result of which these relations were portrayed as ones fraught with jealousy and strife. However, diverse examples lace the novels which show how co-wives have resided in harmony and have nurtured profound friendship so that together they could endure and resist the oppressions of patriarchy.



The paper would conclude by looking at the reforms that were generated from the domestic quarters against the hegemony, which not only initiated change in the private space but also led on to create impact on the public domain. Through these acts of transgression the public and the private bifurcation of space erased to make it a homogeneous ground for the female where she must create her own space. The trilogy is not a story of the three protagonists alone but also of those women whose conscience awakened for liberation as well as those who unfortunately failed to see the light of emancipation. Lucidly enumerating, Ashapura Devi showed the transcendence of women from deadlock conditions at cultural spaces to personhood whereby, they confront the oddities of patriarchal society and become autonomous self.

**Keywords:** L'écriture Feminine, Antahpur, bhadramahila, Child widow, Nationalism.



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The onset of the twentieth century marked for India a period of turmoil with the British transferring power and the country being fatally divided, there had come a volte-face in the political scenario which had left a deep and silent impact on the social platform. Nationalism, which had been the catchword for the previous era had already initiated the polemics regarding the women’s question which was boosted by the efforts of the hegemony. However, this contestation regarding the “myth of Indian womanhood” (Bagchi *Myth* ii) had renewed the concept of *strisiksha* which had established the new patriarchy and incited the women towards emancipation. Throughout the nineteenth century stupendous work had been carried out in upper, middle and lower classes to enable education. Those from privileged families secured degrees from abroad and helped in the scholastic works of Bengal, later challenging the traditional roles within which women’s lives were circumscribed.

Regional writing is a harbinger of the region’s long and proud history which documents the writer’s social, political and cultural engagements which had created the milieu within which the artists articulated their contentions. The women writers of the twentieth century questioned the psychodynamics of the women’s life within the Hindu conjugal order challenging the patriarchy and suggesting alternatives for women. Through Ashapura Devi’s translated trilogy, *Prothom Pratishruti (The First Promise)*, *Subarnalata (Subarnalata)* and *Bakul Katha (Bakul Katha: Tale of the Emancipated Women)* this paper traces the three generations – grandmother, mother and granddaughter in three successive timelines in Bengal starting from the eighteenth century, to locate the women’s question in the broad light of women’s emancipation through education. Being the chronicler of time, the three texts effectively promulgate the tension between the rural and urban ways of life and the conflict between tradition and modernity which becomes the fabric to highlight the in-cultural contentions. The paper has been divided into sub-sections to bring out the thematic conflict more poignantly and to accentuate with the title the women have been analysed chronologically and sequentially which also highlights other concerns like inter-relations and reforms, which form the crux of the framework. The



methodology of the paper has been thematic study and content analysis where arguments have been substantiated through theoretical, historical and sociological readings.

### **L'écriture Feminine**

Pramatha Chaudhuri, a prolific Bengali writer had once said that with the advent of the British, rhyme gave way to reason (Mukherjee16) and prose developed more promptly with the missionaries' initiative of the press. Ashapura's trilogy was seen as a blueprint of the genre of conscious feminine style of writing which did not restrict the writer's space to the kitchen nor did it voice the women's preoccupation with the domestic, rather it showed how the consciousness of women were connected collectively in the urge to fulfil their aspirations in the traditional society. The literature that is by the women and which helps in bringing out the anxieties of their sex later came under the French emblem of *Écriture féminine* which specified the space for women writers. Initially the trilogy had meant to be a long *itihaasor* history of the *antahpur*, however it came to be an alternative history which saw to the need of how women's lives had to be documented and ameliorated as it was the women who were at the site of contestation between the traditional norms and modernity. This gets underscored with Satya's leaving her in-laws for Kasi which is in the same style of Ibsen's Nora as they both had harboured the aspiration of making their life fruitful and secondly, Subarnalata's urge to express herself and her surrounding in the diary she maintained (Chowdhury 50). Helene Cixous had mentioned in her essay how women must write about themselves and through this act of writing would she be able to re-enforce her place in history and make a similar one in the world at some future date. (Cixous 880)

Till the mid-nineteenth century all that was written for women were by men and they generally hovered along the borders of advices, rules and instructions, the echoes of few notable names of women writers which are heard also followed in the footsteps of the men and provided ways in which women could be obedient to the patriarchy. Limited education was to be acquired to find a husband and enable her to read the conduct books and adhere to the norms and ways of colonial society. The other genre of sensational prose was apprehensive about the union between man and woman and concerned the readers with women's failed attempts at love where the female character was confined to the domestic realm and was given no chance of any intellectual maturation. Ashapura Devi's attempt was to re-construct the domestic sphere as a space which would record the changing time, society and transformation of the women's identity.



Satyabati trilogy is a running commentary which accounts for women's nameless intellectual struggle against their society to attain an "autonomous bourgeois self" (Chakravarty277). Ashapura was not much of a rebel in her real life as a result of which she endows Satyabati and Subarnalata as intellectually dazzling portraits who strike out as misfits in the society. With their razor-sharp logicity and reasoning they question the dogmas and counter challenge the existing norms, uncaring about other's consent they chart out their life to advocate gender discrimination and emancipate women toiling under the yoke of oppression. Satya might seem like a poor shadow of Kamalmani from Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Sesh Prashno*(The Last Question) published in 1931yet, Satya is more domesticated and familiar than the former. Language too betrayed Kamalmani who was under the authorial compassion of Saratchandra while Satya's language brings out her authenticity and radiance in terms of being a shrewd critic of the age who would not withstand the dictates of the age nor conform to her conservative upbringing. (Chattopadhyay 80)

### **The Girl Child in Bengal**

The girl child was entrusted with the burden of maintaining the patriarchal family structure in the Hindu household. Her upbringing was to be such that she could fit into and participate in retaining the "patrilineal, patrilocal" family setup. (Bagchi2216)Being a *bhadramahila* was the main motif of the girl's family who must be docile, adhere to the customs and render service at her in-laws, she was warned against developing adventurous zeal or exerting in any form of physical activity, the life of the girl child was securely tied between do's and don'ts. *The First Promise* is set at the end of eighteenth century against the backdrop of a rich household in rural Bengal, tracing the life of the child bride Satya. A personification of frustration and anger, Satya was a rebel whom other girls of her age could only dream of being but could never achieve. She had inherited her fearless spontaneity from her father Ramkali Chatterjee who in spite of being a Brahmin went ahead to question the un-mindful Brahminical practices. He had an awe inspiring personality which made him hold the whole village under his spell and transformed him as a role model for Satya. Being a renowned physician in the village he often got his way through the anger and condemnation of the society but he never used his strength to set right the evils against women. Bagchi in the Forward of the novel observes that Ramkali "remained straight as a ramrod in performing what he considered to be his duty, but this did not prevent him from being an unflinching patriarch" (Chowdhury 3).It is when Satya questions domestic violence that Ramkali realises how intelligent his daughter was and how competent she would have been if she was educated. He had an unflinching patriarchal stance



which failed to understand how tears were an emotion which was beyond the definition of jealousy and possessiveness so on many occasions he neglected his wife and made rash decisions. Satya was self educated and had herself learned to see the society critically, hidden from the eyes of the elders she used to spend hours reading and writing, at times painstakingly manufacturing ink from the herb “*puimetuli*” (Malabar spinach fruits) which grew in the countryside (Chowdhury 45).

Satya’s self learning efforts are later criticised as a way to defy the societal setup, however from an early age she had continuously resisted protests against her education. When she had revealed the secret of her education to her playmate Punyi, the later had retorted it as being a taboo for women. Satya retaliated by saying that all the rules are for *meyemanush* (womenfolk) as if the men folk were not from the womb but came by the tide. Women’s education during the time of Satya was supposed to be derived from the knowledge of the epics which came in the form of oral learning and experiences from their work which was confined to the household. The sharpness of Satya’s nature had enabled her to see women’s life as a long imprisonment in the *antahpur*, as slaves to reproductivity and feminine conduct. The women’s life was divided into childhood and womanhood as after puberty she was given up to her in-laws in marriage whereby denying any form of mental or physical adjustments that were needed in adolescence.

Being equally feared and looked upon by the young, Satya had once asked her brother Neru if the Hindu goddess of learning was not a female. It was ironic as well as painful to witness the gendered segregation which corned those women who wanted to have a fair share of intellectual and economic freedom. With the reign of old patriarchy, characterised by the mother-in-law at the helm of the family, good women were denied education so as to prevent early widowhood and from going blind. Staying oblivious to the fact that the goddess Saraswati is herself a female, the women were relegated to an innate emotional and domestic life where they were valued for their body - blamed and praised as per the need. Exercise of intellect was seen as a public activity and women who dared to take up literary pursuits were seen as transgressing their role and encroaching upon the realm of reason. Even when enclosed in the inner quarters of the house, women with books in their hands were feared of escaping into their imaginative faraway places which would bridge the gap between mind and the body and the much preserved, public and the private. Thus, women seeking knowledge became fugitives to their old, familiar world by first secretly and later defiantly moving into the public to seek formal education.



Subarnalata's story is set in the time of Ashapurna and it is in her that the author finds an apt spokesperson for her cause. Being secretly married off at the age of eight following the customs of *gouridan* Suborno had unknowingly upset her mother who in a fit of anger had left for Kashi vowing never to return. Suborno's education was initiated by her mother who wanted her to be educated to be a human being rather than a woman. Being married off at an early age and separated from her mother, she did not let the zeal for knowledge burn out in her heart, rather she was inspired by the writings of Tagore and later documented her life in her journal. Each day she rose to the expectation of adding a new world to her diary but soon being frustrated at her attempts to preserve her literate world at one point in the novel her husband Probodh blames it on Tagore for making Suborno and women like her audacious. (Chowdhury 61)

Jaya didi, their neighbour supplied Suborno with books and magazines through the small hole in the wall however, her small space of intellectual liberty gets usurped by her husband as she had to frequent the labour room (Chowdhury 50). Nonetheless, she followed in the footsteps of her mother and had started to educate the children of her family while others mocked her for her efforts, her sister-in-law modestly conformed to the patriarchal order of living fearful of Suborno's audacious actions. Unlike Satya, Suborno and Bakul shared a small space in childhood and Ashapurna brings them to light prominently in their late adolescent years. Bakul had narrated the story of her mother and grandmother to the writer, Anamika Devi and it is the later who pens down the trilogy with amalgamations of fiction. Suborno had maintained a journal which gets published in cheap news paper accompanied by caricatures and printing mistakes. She gets laughed at by her in-laws and her own children and to save the dignity of her expression she burns the papers away and shows how the patriarchal academia could not grant a woman's work a decent publication. Suborno had left no sign of her creativity but had sowed it in the heart of her daughter who would carry it as a "matrilinear inheritance" and write her mother and grandmother's story before writing her own. (Chowdhury 80)

Bakul was reticent by nature and her mental constitution was sketched by a more pronounced intellectuality, resistance in her was not as loud as was in her grandmother or mother rather she found refuge in silence. She lost her mother when she was seventeen and later on grew up among her siblings. For her intellectual turn of mind she was a regular piece of mockery to the male members of her family and was also denied any form of formal education more so, as for her family female intellectuality was a dubious affair. She has learnt from her mother to empathise with the oppressed and to preach the ethics of non-conformism that she practises dearly. While recounting the life stories she finds a vantage point from where she can



observe and understand life better and escape the daily mayhem to which her equals were subjected to.

### **Mother-Daughter Dyad**

Mythical stories like that of Demeter and Persephone speak of women's bonding foregrounding the sacred mother-daughter relationship which fosters towards the development of the female consciousness. Adrienne Rich is of the opinion that motherhood as an institution was founded on the assumptions of the patriarchy which trivialised the female experiences and overlooked the delicate nuances binding the duo. (Rich 113) Ashapura was aware of this individual and collective dichotomy which though inclusive, forbade the fracturing of female identity and individuation. In the Bengali family setup mothering was not a biological system as the elder female members became surrogate mothers to the child, more so as they shared the same space of the *antahpuram*. With the onset of nuclear family in the twentieth century the space became segregated but the grandmother or aunt continued to have the same maternal relation to the child.

Satya's mother Bhuvaneshwari was the submissive, conforming 'good mother' whose relation with her daughter was fraught with polarities, nonetheless one cannot deflate the fact that it was the fragile and powerless Bhuvaneshwari who had motivated her daughter's rebellious thought processes. For Satya's mother it is fear which had dominated her belief system, she was the symbol of the silenced and unawakened consciousness who is seen outside the male canon. She is afraid to question or suggest or to take any liberty with her indifferent radical thinking husband, she remains anxious of her defiant daughter's ways. When her marriage and later her mother's death alienates her from her unassuming mother completely she embarks on the quest to unchain women from this unknown fear and guilt. Throughout her life she had respected her father for being scholarly and had looked down upon her mother, but before leaving she tells her husband that if her sons grow up like human beings then they should establish a school named, 'Bhubaneshwari Vidyalaya'. She later realises how through the opportunity of education women like her mother could have had a different life and it is in this earnestness that she aspires to immortalise her mother's name. (Chowdhury 127)

Satya's mothering was courageous and different from those of her time as she had refused to be a victim and had declined to educate her daughter on the terms of society. Satya does not taint Suborno with sympathy for her future plight rather she wrestles to change the cycle of repetition in which the lives of women were entwined. Julia Kristeva is of the opinion that





motherhood is not an ethical duty or role and Satya fits perfectly to this dictum as she was not the loving and suffering mother of the patriarchal society. (Kelly 5) If seen the physicality of her existence then Satya is present for only nine years and leaves the house when Suborno's marriage is fixed, not adhering to the conventional system of mothering her child Satya felt she would rather find meaning in her life by teaching women and herald change by uplifting their consciousness. She however continued to dwell in the mind of Suborno who found her mother living and alive in her own logicity and reasoning. This voice of cognition had educated and empowered her to look beyond the domestic which confined between duty of reproduction and the responsibility of the housework. Need for widening the mental horizon finds an extension in the physical world with Suborno's demand of the *dakhiner baranda* (south-facing balcony) which would facilitate for her urge of being abreast with the happenings of the outside world.

When Suborno reads the letter that her mother had written to her she is thrilled as her mother's voice substantiates the life long struggle that she had embarked upon. The letter stays true to the image of Satya that Suborno had borne all along, it becomes reminiscent of what Adrienne Rich would say, "I wanted her to mother me again". (Rich 104) The words of the letter prove to be like elixir, empathising with and healing the deep gashes she had suffered in her daily battle with conformity. She then understood how both of their thoughts had combined together to create the identical issue in their mind and unknowingly they were fighting the same cause, acknowledging this Suborno finds strength and zeal in her heart which also gratifies her past wounds as she had blamed herself for being the cause for which her mother left home.

Bakul, in the third generation i.e. post-independence, knew that the battles and bitterness of the women were responsible for creating a liveable space for women like her. Earlier Bakul felt embarrassed at the emotional outbursts of her mother but later she understood that she must be like a detached observer and must perceive everything with an intelligent perception. Bakul understood Suborno's yearning for self expression as she too had a desire for creative expression but she was late in her maturation as the manuscripts of *Smriti Kotha* that was penned by her mother was already destroyed. To seal this vent there was the deliberate need to bring Anamika Devi, who was the transformed Bakul so that the three generation saga could be replenished with fiction where ever needed. Her father and brothers forgets about her marriage which acts as a boon in disguise and as the binding chains of tradition slowly slips away Bakul immerses into the role of Anamika Devi. However, Bakul wins where Suborno had failed as she does not raise her voice or argues rather she smiles sarcastically and stands erect with calm dignity to establish her right to do what she thinks is correct.



Apart from the mother-daughter bond there was the grandmother, aunt and sister-in-law who filled the generation gap and made the womanly bond more strong and special. Anamika Devi acknowledges in the beginning of the novel that she had taken the text from Bakul's notebook, who had resolved to pen down her grandmother and mother's story and pay her debt to the women who had struggled to create the space of openness and freedom which Bakul's generation can savour. In writing about her grandmother Bakul had to toil, she had to painstakingly collect each and every detail of her grandmother's life and had to peruse over the history of women's struggle. After all the effort, the Satyabati she sketched spoke of a deep bond and reverence that Bakul bore in her heart. Satya was never spoken about by Suborno as her name was a taboo in their house but she was very much living in the heart of the later till her death, thus Bakul's experience of Satya was through a psychic rendition which had later transformed into a bond. This relation which the protagonists experience with their ancestors on a psychic level inaugurates their collective struggle which also deconstructs the old notion of disharmony that existed between women.

Non-biological mothering which was prevalent in the Bengali joint family also finds its voice in the novels highlighting the aunt-niece relations which cultivated from the role of mere nurturance to a bond of enlightening and empowering. In *The First Promise*, Mokshada and Satya share a relation based on contrariety- Mokshada as the champion of the patriarchal and brahminical order and Satya who saw through the follies of the system and left no stones unturned to interrogate its infallibility, being young she failed to see the root cause of the problem which could adopt women as a victim and a weapon. From a relation filled with bickering Satya grows up to fathom the denial in Mokshada's life which had apparently cheated her of happiness. As a child widow she had never known or seen her husband and as a result her disposition had become vitriolic permeating into every living action and thought. Satya realised how she deserved sympathy not hatred and she initiated the attitudinal change in Mokshada who goes to see her niece off who was going to start a new life in the city. Mokshada of the past would have been angry with her niece's rebellious and audacious nature but Satya's influence transforms her to show how it was a right of Satya to want to carve out her niche on the face of patriarchy.

In *Bakul Katha* it is a similar space of sensitive unity which is shared by Shampa and Bakul. The restrained Bakul and the frivolous Shampa have more dissimilarity in their nature yet, they develop a bond of admiration and respect. Bakul's creative faculties work more efficiently in the boisterous company of Shampa who was also the only person in the family who



dared to barge into her private domain unannounced. At times Bakul gets exasperated with Shampa's indolent comment on daily affairs yet, their mutual relation stays strong where Shampa respects Bakul's quiet dignity and intellectualism and Bakul admires the fearless and bold nature of Shampa which signified the 'new womanhood'.

### **Of Bonding & Complications: Other Women**

In patriarchal society female relations are un-recognised, more so if they are between the co-wives or sister-in-laws as on a dominant level these relations are perceived as being fraught with jealousy and power which arise out of economic and financial security. The relation with the mother or grandmother brings the question of blood relation which is absent in the relation with the sister-in-law yet, one cannot look past those vital moments where both share the same vision or find in the other the imprint of the long lost sister. Satya and Saudamini in the first book shares the relation under scrutiny, they are both of different temperament where Satya challenges the existing system and Sadu (as she is called in the novel) does almost everything possible to retrieve her long lost conjugal relation. Both of their expectations, experiences and responses to and from life is different – Satya dreams of liberation from the folds of social and familial hierarchy while Sadu wanted safety and shelter within the bindings of patriarchy. Being a rejected wife she is seen as an appendage to the family where her mother, Elokeshi taunts her caustically which she bears with resolute and firm temperament.

Sadu had become the confidant of Satya from the time she had come to live in Navakumar's family and later she understood how Sadu like others wanted to be loved and cared for. Being an unlettered, ignorant village girl Sadu does not fathom the existing social changes and Satya's fight in it but she realises that Satya is of extraordinary personality whom Navakumar's family does not deserve. Ashapurna is skilful enough to make the camaraderie between the two strong as at the fag end of the novel when Satya leaves Sadu says how she wants to seek blessings from Satya, boldly refusing to acknowledge the patriarchal ideology regarding women's freedom. She is sensitive enough to understand the hard decision of Satya's renouncing the family but at the same time she also extends solidarity with the women who had for so long been defying the long born shackles of societal norms.

Suborno and Subala in the second book is another pair, proving one to be an extension of another. Muktakeshi's children were moulded by her ideology and those which dominated the then circumstances but Subala thought differently and in her was present the sight to look beyond caste so, she had married her daughters to young men of different caste and established



herself as another woman on the road to emancipation. Subala turns out to be endearing to Suborno as she valued individuality and saw others for what they were, before Suborno's death Subala had told her that if the former was a man then she would have left the fetters of home and had set out to see the world much like Ambika, hearing which Suborno is choked with love as no one before Subala had tried to understand her.

Ashapura had also intervened into the polemics of co-wives which the patriarchy saw as an impossible site for harmonious relation. Co-wives look upon one man as the provider and master which frequently led to situations of jealousy but that their relation could also have solidarity and friendship is overlooked. The first book has two pairs of co-wives, Sarada and Patli and Saudamini and Mukund's second wife. The *sejuti* ritual which was prevalent then was performed to obliterate any form of co-wife, the songs chanted in the ceremony were abuses hurled at the co-wife but if she had a chance of co-wife then the woman would have to swallow her anger and make amends with the system. Sarada being part of the domestic order could not accept the presence of Patli however; she continued to be the *borobou* or elder wife and performed her duties meticulously. Ashapura through this situation of the co-wife tried to show that education is the determinant for one's freedom, Sarada due to her inability depends upon the provider and accepts her fate even though her mind remains fragmented. Satya though in a different situation, has the ability to break free from the family as she trusted her capabilities for being able to provide for herself, also becoming an example for other women in the community.

Saudamini and Mukund's second wife share a harmonious relation transcending all forms of denial and leading one to help another. Saudamini showered love on the co-wife almost like a daughter and laughed when the co-wife teased her by saying that she might have been her mother in some other life. Being able to understand and love each other, both stay at peace in each other's company making their relationship a talisman against the daily misery and oppression they had to face. This complete absence of rivalry between co-wives is not an imaginative preoccupation of the female writer, rather it re-inscribes women bonding and cross examines socio-cultural context which acts better to highlight the sexism of women.

Lacing the novels is a gamut of various types of women and innumerable social ills that plague the community of the female sex, Ashapura through selected characters shows how Shankari of *The First Promise* and Namita of *Bakul Katha* brave through their living situations despite being shunned from the joys and colours of their life. The former, Shankari, is an eighteen year old widow, caged in the frosted world of dejection and societal norms. Being young



and beautiful, the patriarchal brahminical society becomes apprehensive of her moral strength and thus keeps a close eye on her which heightens to the degree of humiliation. A series of disgraceful situations lead her to escape so that she could seek emotional and mental refuge elsewhere. However, Shankari's tale is a dismal tale of a widow whose desertion from society leads her to fall trap to seduction, deception and suicide. Though short lived yet, she leaves a deep impact on society as she had participated in the emancipation league through her first act of denial to accept the cloistered life of the Hindu widow.

Renouncing the world for Rishikesh, Namita's husband had left her at the charity of her uncle entitling her to the status of a rejected wife. The overflow of good food, ornaments, rich clothes hurt her sensitive temperament which could not forget the abandonment which had ultimately provoked her on the road to flesh trade and then to try her fate at the celluloid finally resulting in her suicide. Like Shankari, Namita also had commenced work on identity and representation of the individual but they blur out before fruition. Saudamini of *The First Promise* is Satya's sister-in-law who is first rejected by her husband for his sexual jealousy and then accepted back to satiate his ceaseless lust. Being of a tender disposition Sadu goes back to live with her husband to escape being an adjunct member in her paternal home. Education and economic freedom is unknown to Sadu as a result of which she remains mute to her husband's perverse ways which ultimately turns her to be a cynic. However, there is an innate knowledge of the need for education and financial independence in her which makes her admire women like Satya who were fighting the skirmish tirelessly.

Uma Sashi of *Suvarnalata* is Muktokeshi's eldest daughter-in-law who remains unaware of the true meaning of life, giving priority to other's need she pushes herself to a corner whereby she becomes a demure, frightened person afraid to think for herself. Being a conventional Hindu woman she harboured qualities of "modesty, humility, softness, patience and self sacrifice" (Borthwick 55) and lived with the idea of living for others in the "non-secular parochial principle of dharma" (Chakravarty 250). She is a contrast to Suborno's resolute and obstinate self and shudder's to her sister-in law's audacious nature. Uma Sashi lacks self worth and self respect, this is so pronounced in her nature that she feels deeply hurt when Suborno appoints a cook. Maintaining concordance in the household was her only way of proving her presence yet, she ultimately transcended to being a non-entity. The most interesting nature of Uma is that in spite of living amidst change she prefers to remain static and cringes in fear when she witnesses Suborno trying to transcend the disciplinary law. In this polarised world of gender-power playsome women attempted at crystallising their identity and actualising their dormant strength



while the majority of the community remained ignorant, in self-denial and in a sorrowful state where they had no other choice but to oblige.

### **Reforms from the *Antahpur***

Not having a formal education or the ability to raise a voice in protest, Ashapura challenged patriarchy through her work of art, she claimed *Suvarnalatato* be her favourite though she herself was akin to Bakul's temperament where silence was their tool of protest. In the aspiration to locate the woman within the family and the later within the society there, comes the bifurcation of the private and the public which has emphasised over and again the duties and responsibilities of women – being enclosed within the private and being diverse in nature from those rendered by men. However, this ramification have been deconstructed by Ashapura and writers like her to show that the *ghor* and the *bahir* are two spaces which are interdependent on each other thus, one affects the other in their understanding of the subject and also asserts in an amalgamation of the personal and the political. Women's question was a much debated topic which started to gain ground from the end of the eighteenth century, the nationalists and the colonial masters focused their attention more on this matter as status of women was seen as an indicator for the society's progress.

The ideological urge to uplift women differed for both the government and the reformists, the latter assumed a position of sympathy with the oppressed women which transformed the picture of women as a tradition bound and of culturally un free nature in the eyes of the colonisers. Forbes in her work had said that the British saw the domination of their hegemony as a proof of their moral superiority and when discussions were initiated regarding the best way to rule, all arguments would steer towards the man woman relation. (Forbes 13) Whereas Bagchi looks at the reformist attitude of the colonial masters with scepticism as the collective theme was to make Indian women the symbol of the "downtrodden society of the subcontinent". (Bagchi 3) The reformers on the other hand intended to re-establish their lost status of power and glory which was jeopardised in the public realm. Home was the only place where the men could still have an upper hand and be the head of the clan whereas outside he had to bow down to the wishes of the foreign master. The focus that fell on women was fictive in nature and it is this decentring of the female which is another aspect of Ashapura's trilogy.

Resistance is placed on a parallel ground where men rebelled against the Raj and women in spite of aiding the men in it also simultaneously challenged their oppressive state in the patriarchal order. Ashapura focuses on the effective way in which the three protagonists relate



and communicate with the community yet, she does not sideline the then on-going process of liberation from the Britishers which is made stronger by the presence of Bhavatosh master from The First Promise and Ambika Kumar in *Subarnalata*. As it is the story of the women so they are invested with power and an agency through which they can fulfil their role for their community. Satya in the first book asserts her existence like the proud Eve in Kabita Sinha's poem (Sinha2014) who is the first to rebel, to gain knowledge and awaken one's consciousness. She was much ahead of her time – a thinking, rational and logical girl born in the age amidst unthinking masses who saw these qualities in a woman as sinful. Her mental cognition is strong enough to make her take note on the then prevailing conditions of conjugality, religion, caste, financial independence and education in regard to women.

Satya's transgression takes place on dual level, one which is within the familiar space and the other which concerns society. She fathomed the grievous state of women to arise from their lack of knowledge and ignorance which could be eradicated by education as a result of which she wages the war for literary scholarship which continues with Bakul. Being of just nine years she made a rhyme to be sung loudly at Jatada who practised domestic violence on his wife, staging perhaps the first of such revolt in the village. The blessing of education as a tool comes when Satya in her middle ages wrote a letter to the government demanding them to interrogate the murder of Puti, her young sister. Puti was a nine year old child bride who was murdered by her husband on refusing his conjugal rights, a similar case of such in 1889 created uproar in Calcutta when Phulmoni a bride of ten died due to marital rape committed by her husband of twenty nine years. (Sarkar 100) The Sarvamangala Vidyalaya gives Satya a more definite meaning to life where she started teaching the women of the village. The event of witnessing the historic meeting between the Brahmo leader Keshub chandra Sen and Ramkrishna Paramahansa with her students broke the notions of conformity on double grounds – that of travelling to the city without any male company and of entering the house of a Brahmo.

*Stridhan* was the only wealth that a woman could possess and it consisted of the jewelleryes that were given to her during her wedding. Accumulation of such wealth was also a way of exhibiting, Satya refuses to be a mannequin and gives a gold chain to a poor boy she meets in the city, sells her bangles to treat Navakumar and refuses to take any landholdings from her father. Her friendship with the reformist, Bhavatosh master redefines the male-female relationship which was restricted to the family, Satya through her friendship marks the beginning of a healthy relation built on mutual love and respect. Moving to Calcutta and teaching Suhashini the orphaned girl to study are the other changes she ushered in which finally



culminate in re-ordering the conjugality norm where she is valiant enough to break out of the system in order to make something of her life.

Suborno is a subject in process whose life is more stifling than Satya's yet, she refuses to be an object forever and strives to create her identity and a space for herself. She transgresses the domestic setup and creates effective changes in her final home which undergo repercussions in the immediate society. Satya's act of abandoning conjugality portrayed Suborno as a daughter of a woman who had committed unpardonable sin. Her in-laws are orthodox and traditional minded while the male members harbour a chauvinistic attitude to life, in spite of these hardships Suborno ushers in change to purge the mustiness of her family. In the household child-birth was unmentionable in the public or amidst the presence of men, Suborno gets angry when her husband mentions child-birth to be a woman's business. She retorts to Muktokeshi when she is given dirty rags during child-birth in the untidy and dingy labour room. The fight was to establish the worth of the female body and to deconstruct the hypocrisy regarding the dirty birthing chambers and the glorification of motherhood. The claim for space and need for expression in Suborno are synonymous as in her new house she could manage to find time for herself to admire the starlit sky and escape from the obligations of being a mother and a wife. *Smriti Katha* is not her testimony of emotional outpouring but also contains her thoughts regarding the situation of women and the society, becoming a manifesto of a time in future. In the eyes of old patriarchy where Muktakeshi is the head of the domestic affairs Suborno, her *mejo-bou* (third daughter-in-law) would have been termed as *mukhara* or sharp-tongued as Suborno through speech and action brings in changes which might seem like a sign of impertinence to her mother-in-law.

Suborno's daughters Parul and Bakul also lead forward the battle of their grandmother as they are concerned about issues of subjectification and individuation and continue to transgress their prescriptive system. Parul is different from Suborno and cannot participate in her mother's fearless disposition, however Suborno is resurrected in her when she chooses to live on her own in a house near the Ganga, turning down the possibility to stay with her sons. She challenges the age old notion of widowed mothers being cared for by their elder sons and even counter passes the contemptuous remarks of the neighbours who scorn her for neglecting her responsibilities as a mother and a grandmother.

Bakul in the third book emphasises a self control on her space which restricted her world to few; being reticent to the vitriolic comments of her family members she survived by her





erudite world. The posterior side of the house transform into her room giving her a wider space - her private space is sacred which no one dares to violate. She carves out a physical space for herself which was denied before to women. She is a well known writer and her quiet nature carries an authoritarian attitude which keeps disruptive people at bay. Situated in the twentieth century the social scenarios have undergone a transformation as education for women have been actualised and 'new women' have stepped out in the public to gain economic independence. With her influence, Shampa and Ramla transforms Muktakeshi's conservative house giving way to marriage of love than that of convenience, in a way obliterating class and caste.

The mid and the late colonial periods brought about the Bengali middle class whose women were positioned as servile homemakers even though exceptions were few there was a constant effort at pushing the limits, women like Kadmbini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Bose who were first women graduates in 1886 (Chatterjee 253) became role-models for their community. In America and England feminist movements were in full swing yet, reverberations of those voices took a while to create an effect in the cloistered and dingy homes of the colonies. The trilogy is not a story of the three protagonists alone but also of those women whose conscious awakened for liberation and those who unfortunately failed to see the light of emancipation. Lucidly enumerating, Ashapura shows the transcendence of women from deadlock conditions at cultural spaces to personhood whereby, they confront the oddities of patriarchal society and also become autonomous self. Through the trilogy Ashapura had dared to create a world where women would be the sole presider of their body and be able to execute visions which would alter and sustain human existence.

### **Endnote:**

1. See Partha Chatterjee's *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* (1989).

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