

Conflict and Dialectical Relation Paving the Way for Women's Emancipation: A Reading of Ashapura Devi's *Satyabati Trilogy*

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Abstract

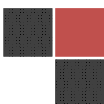
Human society is always in a flux; it has always been a space for construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Every human being, being indispensable part of that society, is never out of that process and takes part in the formation of a new and developed entity of the society. For a drastic change, society must undergo a long process and in that process conflict and dialectical relation (between individual and society, individual and individual, individual and self) contribute equal share. Ashapura Devi and her works formed "a silent resistance" (Datta 9) and in her *Satyabati Trilogy*, depicting the story of three generations of women, she focused on how a woman created larger space for the women. Colonial and postcolonial Bengal witnessed many forms of dialectical relation, one of them is between radical thinking and conservative ideas, and the growing consciousness played the role of a catalyst. This paper endeavours to analyze how conflict and dialectical relation paved the way for women's emancipation.

Keywords: conflict, dialectical relation, change, resistance, emancipation.

I have observed society in general. There is a heaven and hell difference between our childhood and the present age. Girls did not enjoy any rights then...In those days, the only duty relegated to women was to grace the household akin to Goddess Lakshmi, and remain a diffident and self-effacing wife. Keeping everybody pleased was the one-point agenda. Women today are involved in many different activities. They cannot afford to stick to a single 'role'—they must assume many roles. (Datta 250)

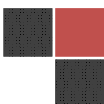
In a conversation with Subhadra Urmila Majumdar, Ashapura Devi, one of the milestones who contributed a lot in the long process of women's emancipation through her creative output, asserted the afore-quoted view on the condition of women in Bengal and the gradual change and development that took place in society over the years. The issue of women's emancipation is not something that suddenly dropped into one's mind after waking up from a sound sleep and s/he started screaming loudly about it. Various types of conflicts and dialectical relations (between individual and society, individual and individual, individual and self) pave the way for a drastic change in a society. And this is also applicable to the issue of women's emancipation. Belonging to a traditional and immensely conservative family, Devi was devoid of formal education though her parents encouraged her in her literary career. Being a woman, she was marginalized but her position was a little different from other women of her society as her "father was an admirer of the colonial Raj" (qtd. in Datta 9). But her lack of formal education didn't achieve success in suppressing her voice, her protest against all odds in a patriarchal society as she clarified neatly, "*ja dekhi tai likhi*" (I write whatever I see) (Datta 9). She herself asserted, "All those unpronounced protests of mine have appeared in my writing and in figures of rebellious women like Satyavati of 'Pratham Pratisruti'" (Chowdhuri WS-48). She witnessed many things in society as she herself belonged to both the colonial and postcolonial period and gave utterance to all those practical experiences in her writing forming "a silent resistance" (Datta 9). One such great storehouse of facts is her *Satyabati Trilogy* that spans from colonial to postcolonial Bengal depicting three generations of women through her excellent creative outputs, *Pratham Pratisruti* (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967) and *Bakulkatha* (1974). Devi presented before us the extraordinary struggle of the three generations of her revolutionary protagonists against the shackles of family, society and more particularly patriarchal society allowing considerable space for her readers to experience the gradually developing consciousness among men, women, society and nation as she depicted the suffering, resistance and protest of women and the possibility of the emerging new nation through this trilogy. According to Indira Choudhuri, "It is significant that Ashapura in telling the story of three generations of women sees the 19th century as the originary moment for the formation of women as subjects of their own discourses" (Chowdhuri WS 47) and the discourse achieved the shape of a continuous struggle for emancipation. And the hope for emancipation comes out as a result of the conflict between growing consciousness of an individual and the society s/he is part of.

"For a long time there was an accepted belief that all kinds of women's activities should belong to the 'private' domain of the individual and family with no direct bearing upon the state and society. Hence women's issues belong very much to the private domain also" (Ghosal 793). They remained confined to the domestic world only, whereas male dominated the outside world authoritatively. Women became the care-takers of their in-law's family and turned into procreative machines. "She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female—this is sufficient to define her" (Beauvoir33)—this concept started prevailing in



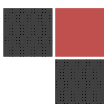
society. But that was not supposed to go on forever because the whole world is not outside the process of evolution. Both male and female started to be enlightened with a gradually developing sense of awareness with the passage of time and “this changed attitude owes its origin to feminism and feminist movements” (Ghosal 793-794). History tells us how women could walk equally with men on earth but the foreign invasions enforced them to accept long exiles thousand years ago. They had experiences of purdah, burning pyre, isolation and so on. Again, with the arrival of British people in India, people came in contact with the western ideas and thoughts that influenced them to think of women and social reforms. So, all this is because of the ongoing dialectical process that is going on continuously over the years. Dialectical method is basically a discourse of two or more different points of views about a particular issue and in that discourse, there would be an objective to establish the truth bringing to the fore various logical and valid arguments. And again, the dialectical method hints at the process of evolution. Michael Rosen in the preface to his book *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism* has quoted Alexander Herzen's definition of dialectic, “Dialectic is the algebra of revolution” (ix). Ashapura Devi's famous trilogy can easily be analyzed from this perspective of conflict, dialectical relation and gradual change.

Satyabati, the protagonist of *Pratham Pratisruti* did not fit in the society she belonged to as well as in the concept of ‘womanhood’ that prevailed in that society, rather she was someone who did more fit both in the western concept of ‘new woman’ and the eastern concept of *behaya* (impudent) and *dajjal meyemanush* (stubborn woman). She was the unusual daughter of an unusual father. Being a woman, she had no right to possess intelligence and sense of identity living in a patriarchal society. But she committed the ‘sin’ of having that consciousness. So, naturally she could no more be the part of that society she belonged to. More interestingly, she was brave enough to protest against the so-called *punya karma* (sacred deed) of *gouridana* (custom of marriage of an eight-year-old Hindu girl) though ironically, she herself became a victim of that ‘punya karma’. From her early childhood, Satya showed some extraordinary qualities for which her father, Ramkali expressed his grief, “Aha meye manush, tai sob e britha” (everything is meaningless as she is woman) (Devi 19). But Ramkali was someone who knew and understood his daughter that she was not like others, not like other girls of her age and of that society. She was born with extraordinary qualities that were unexpected in a traditional Hindu girl. Society, over the years, very obediently followed the laws propounded by the ‘lawgiver’ Manu and believed that “a woman must never be independent” (Manu 195). Another figure Shankari, being a widow, dared to give importance to her desire, which was strictly prohibited in the society where she did not fit in. She eloped with Nagen, whom she loved. But others like Bhubaneswari, Punyi, Soudamini became perfect women of 19th century India. Satyabati's undaunted and brave soul refused to bow down before the conservative society even at the very critical moment of her life. Critics may say that she is not a perfect mother as she left the scene without even thinking about her little Subarna who recently became the victim of ‘sacred’ ceremony of *gouridana*. But the point is, being such an extraordinary figure, how could someone give up the position? How could she forget her own self? Naturally she couldn't, because she possessed the incomparable vigour and vitality uncommon in others and she rejected the code of socialization which was formulated for the girls to make sure that she can cope with “the patrilineal, patrilocal family structure of caste Hindu Bengal” (Bagchi, “Socializing” 2214). In that battle, Satya alone occupied one side and the society was on



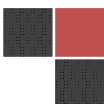
the other. Later she realized that she alone could not fight the battle as she failed to protect her own beloved daughter from the aggressive rules of society. She needed more and more Satyabatis like her and in order to overcome that conflict, radical education would be the only key factor. With that intention to spread the bliss of education among all, she went to Kashi where she took the great responsibility to educate others. A woman took the oath to create space for the women engaging herself in a life-long combat against the conservative patriarchal society. Here an echo of Victorian feminist Mary Wollstonecraft is found as she was radically seeking education as a means to improve women's position in society (though in western context), where, she believed, "the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched... (Wollstonecraft 11). The conservative and patriarchal Bengali society may interpret Satya's act of leaving the stage as a coward's deed but in fact, she was not someone to be confined in a limited space rather she was born with extraordinary capabilities to serve greater purpose, to devote her life to prepare a larger battlefield against gender inequality and for this, everyone should keep patience as the conflict only started to emerge, giving space to stronger conflicts. In her letter to Subarna, she wrote, "Streeloker jahakichhute anadhikar, tahar adhikar arjan korite hoibe streejatikei" (women should have to acquire all their rights themselves) (Devi 631). The rebellious soul in Satyabati knew how to deal with an unfree world because she herself experienced the existential crisis living in that claustrophobic world and she entered into the battlefield to be a part of a larger-than-life conflict.

Satya started the opening move for a strong battle and the next generation made it stronger. Subarnalata, the representative of second generation, also became the victim of the red eyes and clutches of family and society, who were sucking blood from Satya's dearest Subarna like octopuses. She could not show courage to come out of that surrounding like her mother, rather she became a procreating machine, giving birth to nine children because custom said that it was the holy duty of a chaste and *patibrata* wife to fulfil all the desires of the husband either willingly or unwillingly and if she violates "her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin" (Manu 197). But being the daughter of the rebellious Satya, she failed to erase the flames of protest and revolt from her soul and that was the 'fault' of her character. That's why she was entitled as an arrogant woman, not an 'ideal' one in the eyes of the patriarchal society though "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought" (Marx 29). Society rejected to give the attribute of 'ideal' to Subarna like her mother. Subarna had more 'faults'—being a woman she committed the 'sin' of reading books; she forced the girl children to read; she uttered the words of a Swadeshi and so on. There was a long list of faults in her. She realized the two forms of domination over women—one by patriarchal society and the other by British colonizers. Women were doubly marginalized. She uttered, "Paradhinatar jantrana amra meyemanushra bujhbona toh r ke bujhbe? Amra j chakarer o chakrani" (Who will understand the pains of subordination except we, the women? We are maid-servants of servants) (Devi 531). Where there was search for freedom from the clutches of British colonizers in the world (here, in Bengal), at home there was the ongoing struggle for emancipation of countless Satyabatis and Subarnalatas. Both were desperate enough, courageous enough but the latter was unable to come out of the structure of family unlike the former. The Subarnalatas could only flutter their wings like caged birds in the



suffocating surroundings and finally chose *swechhamrityu* (dying at one's own will) but they spread the fire among the women of next generation. Ashapura Devi herself said that socialists kept records of the history of evolution of the society and she herself tried to keep the pen-pictures of that particular evolution in her stories. Subarnalata's struggle can be interpreted from a broader perspective. She found a ray of hope in the form of Swadeshi movement. She realized that women should not be restricted to the kitchen and *aanturghar* (breeding room); rather they should come out and join hands in the Swadeshi movement, which could prove their ability, their power, their strength equal to men as she herself took part in that movement (though in her family surroundings) by burning British clothes. She wanted to convince everyone, both the male and the female about the power of a woman. Perhaps she thought that one day this freedom movement would take the shape of all movements against inequalities in society and she knew, surely that day would come when the men would realize their fault and they would say that whatever they did to women, everything was wrong and women are really the epitomes of power, "Atodin ja korechhi anyay korechhi. Satyi e tomra shaktirupini" (Devi 532).

Finally, there is Bakul of *Bakulkatha*. She belongs to the postcolonial Bengal where a drastic change has taken place—on the one hand, it is free from the clutches of the British empire and on the other, the society is influenced by the waves of feminist movements of Western countries. Ashapura Devi introduces us with Bakul, the youngest daughter of Subarnalata, who remains unmarried, takes a pseudonym, Anamika Devi and chooses writing as her profession. She proves that marriage cannot be the ultimate destiny of a woman; she has her own choice, own will, own desires. She belongs to such a society where there is woman like Satyabhama who is leading a rough and arrogant life. There is Shampa, who finally achieves her goal by marrying someone of her own choice and that is also granted by society at the end. They are not one or two in number like Satya and Subarna but they are many who can show their courage to protest against the social barriers. This is the result of the long and continuous conflict that began with Satya and continued over the years. As nature is not something that demands rest and immobility, rather it is always a part of continuous movement, conflict, change, renewal, development, society is also like that nature and in that process, it becomes a witness of the great game of break and form. But one question still remains—is it the most desired society which is based on the sufferings and struggles of all those Satyabatis and Subarnalatas? This last part of this trilogy hits at this particular point that women's emancipation does not mean the dominance of women over men or the willfulness of each and every member of society. Of course, *antahpur* can never be the only destined place for women, they must join hands with men to bring a new shape to the developing society. To quote Devi, "The windows of the antahpur are now open, but along with fresh air, pollutants are also making their way into the secured domain, setting aflame the tranquil family atmosphere. As a consequence, women are getting somewhat misled, by diverse perspective on modernity" (Datta 181). So, in search of freedom one should not lose his/her own self in the sea of change, one must not be misled. Bakul tries to pay tribute to her mother and grandmother (maternal) with the help of her pen and voice. Subarnalata also tried to use this method to pay proper homage to women like her mother but she failed to do so. The third generation succeeds in giving a shape to that unfulfilled work. Bakul is the eternal investigator to find out the arbitrariness of and limitation in freedom. Multiple new ideas are emerging day by day as society is always in continuous conflict with itself and it is always having a dialectical relation with each and every component living in it and at the end the society

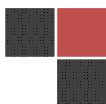


will be gifted with something new, more radical, more reformed. Here the words of Thomas Paine are quite appropriate, “The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph” (116).

To quote Ashapura Devi’s words, “The sleep does not last forever. Her sense of unworthiness caused her to wake up to long neglected pain and she asked herself, ‘Why was I never called out into the world of work? Should I be content with the insignificant role within the four walls of my home?’ She asked herself, ‘Why should I not try to discover my real worth? Surely I need not always be dependent on others?’ (Bagchi, *Indian Women* 20). Women’s search for identity does not mean the struggle against the male sex rather against injustice and inequality. A society based on equality is possible only when each and every human being will understand the value of each other as Devi hopes for a better society, “Only a clear understanding of goals can contribute to the formation of a better society” (Bagchi, *Indian Women* 23). Change in society and in the mind of individual is a must. Ashapura Devi, through her *Satyabati Trilogy*, presents before the sensitive eyes that change and development are always significant parts of a long process and these are not something like cooked food that are presented before the eater, rather these are the results of the dialectical relation between radical thinking and conservative ideas and the growing consciousness plays the role of a catalyst.

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