

GOLDEN RESEARCH THOUGHTS

A “SILENT” PROTEST IN THE VOICE OF BENGALI WOMEN: RE-READING THE NOVELS OF ASHAPURNA DEVI AND BANIBASU



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Abstract :

Ashapurna Devi and BaniBasu have always tried to focus on the marginalized condition of Bengali women. For them Bengal had given birth not to women but to the future mother. Bengali culture at that time affirms only one identity that is the motherhood. In colonial Bengal female body should be a reproductive one and the climactic torturous moment comes when a ten years old girl is forcibly married to an old person and with the death of that person the girl finds its new identity and as she is not able to give birth to a child the only way left to her is that she had to accept death on her husband's funeral pyre. This was the history of colonial Bengal where women were only the means of production. Twentieth century has experienced many protective voices of many women novelists but most interestingly all of them portrayed the situation with a clear vindictive narrative. But Ashapurna Devi and BaniBasu have carefully created a very different narrative as it starts from the silence and also ends with a silence. A silence never ending and a narrative never voiced. So what lies within this “silence” and how it gradually giving birth to a “protest” that is something I have tried to bring out in my paper.

Keywords: Marginalized, motherhood, female body, colonial Bengal, reproductive, silence, protest.

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INTRODUCTION

In my paper I have focused on the novels of Ashapura Devi and BaniBasu, two women novelists of twentieth century Bengali literature. During this period Bengali fiction has observed the presence of some great women novelists who created a way of their own; Ashapura Devi is one of them who portrayed the Bengali women from a new perspective. Apparently her characters are independent but compromising, in spite of having the ‘will power’ to change the social flaws they seem to lack the courage to stand against the barrier. Her trilogy Pratham Pratisruti [The First Promise] (1964), Subarnalata (1967) and Bakulkatha [The Story of Bakul] (1974) enables the reader to experience the struggle that is presented through her characters, Satyabati, Subarnalata and Bakul. This trilogy therefore traces the experiences of three generations of women. The novels can be sighted as a silent protest of the author who herself was the victim of patriarchal social construct that forbids woman to express her own self. Her frustrations find words in this trilogy as her characters point out the discrepancies of male dominated society and “offer” themselves to be a victim of that norm. I am using the word ‘offer’ because I feel that they willingly chose the way to compromise with the workings of patriarchy in spite of knowing the effects of it. Their purpose is to organize a silent protest against all the wrongs. Ashapura’s women are independent and conscious about the workings of hegemony. Then can’t we apprehend their compromise as nothing but their tolerant silent protest meant for others? They are portraying the backdrops of society through their sacrifice by making a discourse of their own in order to make reader aware of the fact that this patience is the womb of others’ protest. This compromise is the field that prepares the women to fight against one’s own situation. Significantly Ashapura Devi is situating her novels in the colonial Bengal and in twentieth century post-independent state that compels her in framing the problems that coincides with colonial, reformist and nationalist concepts of “motherhood”. In Bengal “Motherhood” decides the woman’s position in her family. In the first two parts of this trilogy I would like to focus on the issue of feminine subjectivity and what it means to be a mother in colonial Bengal. While reading the novels of Bani Basu I felt that there is somehow a same stream of current running throughout the writings of both these writers that binds them together. BaniBasu’s novel Gandharbi (1993) centers around a character named Apala, blessed with a truly musical voice. This novel constitutes a continuous conflict between tradition and one’s individual existence where Apala is a “mother” of three children but still struggles for “becoming” a “mother” as she thinks that she is not able to ‘perform’ her ‘motherhood’. She fails to understand her husband and her children because she is not meant for this social bond in the name of relationship. BaniBasu portrays her as a woman who doesn’t belong to this ‘world’. In her words she is from “Gandharvialok”. Now my question is that why she addresses Apala a woman who is outside of this ‘world’? What is the ‘world’ she is talking about? Though writing in different time span, both Ashapura Devi and Bani Basu portray the Bengali women with a sense of compromise. My purpose would be to bring out with reference the reason behind this compromise as a silent protest and how this silence becomes the voice of resistance.

The silence is the compromise of those women who are dispossessed and exploited by the patriarchy in the form of society and family. In Spivak’s essay “can the subaltern speak?” she explains the fact where the voice is made silent in the third world countries. The silence of the subaltern group appropriates the voice of confirmation and remains unheard to the patriarchy. Previously in Bengal the voice of a widow was silenced by the society who was forcibly married to an old man and “willingly chose” to die with the husband’s funeral pyre. Therefore, Spivak states in an interview, “the subaltern cannot speak” means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard’ (Spivak 1996: 292). Ashapura Devi is writing from the perspective of a third world woman, continuously bringing forward those problem areas that being a woman of a third world country she had to face in her early days. Her narrative is not the silent one but the discourse that is being created through her writing is that of a situation where the voice of a woman remains unheard and forms a silent protest. This silence is the voice of resistance. The characters are using this as a platform where this silent existence somewhere leads the reader to recognize the base of their protest. As Both Ashapura Devi and BaniBasu try to expand a condition where the characters conveying their needs through their expressions to flourish. The characters are struggling to establish their voice but somehow nullified by the society. But the most important thing is that the silence that they are portraying has a dual sense of meaning. In one sense it reflects the compromise that they are doing with their situation and consequently on the other hand they are forming a resistance against a power that forces them to be silent.

The characters like Satyabati, Subarnalata, and Apala are apparently seem to protest against the injustice done to them but their ultimate submission is to marriage and motherhood. Satyabati’s escape from marriage and again her submission to marriage revolves around the notion of continuous struggle that is running within Satyabati. Patriarchy has a tendency to glorify the ideology of motherhood as the indispensable criteria of woman in the cultural life of colonial Bengal. Jashodhara Bagchi has aptly stated that:

Motherhood was seen as the ‘ultimate identity’ of Bengali women. It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of privileges like education and profession that were being wrested by their men and glorifying womanhood only through her reproductive powers. The difference is that while the social reform era addressed live women and tried to bring the colonial state machinery to bear upon their lives, the nationalist era used motherhood as the only viable symbol of Bengali womanhood. It was a symbol, moreover, that helped to bridge the social, religious and political domain of colonial society. (Bagchi, 66)

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It can be sighted as a weapon to snatch the power of women and preparing an ideological conception of strength and power in the name of motherhood. In colonial Bengal, as stated by Jashodhara Bagchi, motherhood can be viewed as ‘an ideology was based on a philosophy of deprivation for women in the world of practice’. Being a mother therefore becomes the prime need of Bengali women, who finds motherhood their way of freedom. But motherhood is all about creating a chain of familial relationship. Family acts on behalf of patriarchy in shaping the mother figure as an icon of a “good woman”, becoming a mother, therefore, actually reifies the stereotypical female gendered role. Ashapura Devi’s trilogy is exclaiming the condition of three generations. In the words of Indira Chowdhury,

...the first two parts of Ashapura’s trilogy focuses on what it means to become a mother in colonial Bengal- what are the responsibilities and what, if any, are the choices – and through this problematic focuses on the issue of female subjectivity. By offering through her 19th century characters alternative accounts of motherhood Ashapura qualifies the idealizing and naturalising accounts of motherhood and attempts to mediate the complexities and often, the impossibility of mother-daughter relationships within patriarchal parameters. The act of becoming a mother within patriarchy signifies the loss of one’s own mother – the fulfillment of a girl’s social destiny condemns her to the state of motherlessness.

The mother herself finds the social recognition when she is married to a man and is carrying his child in her womb. This notion of motherhood thwarts upon her some duties that are towards her husband, child and in-laws. Most interestingly becoming a mother leads to her own motherlessness as in Pratham Pratisruti, Satyabati becomes a mother and Elokeshi gives her the news that her mother is no more. Satyabati tries to break the darkness of her birth chamber but fails to cross the wall of that darkness. The birth chamber becomes symbolic to her own surroundings as the birth of her own child provides her the inability to stand beside her mother’s deathbed. Her desire is collapsed within the darkness of the birth chamber. In pre-colonial and colonial Bengal pregnancy is associated with the idea of separation. This separation involves a period after delivery when the mother is separated with her child from the outer world into a dark birth chamber. This alienation from the society can also be sighted as an alienation of the mother as an ‘other’ from her position in her family.

Motherhood also comes with the typical colonial notion of usurping the female body. The body of the mother becomes the place of contestation between the colonizer and the colonized. Apparently Ashapura Devi’s characters are independent and possessed of their own voice but my question is that if they are truly creating their own protest against the society then why are they submitting themselves towards the patriarchal order? The answer is that Ashapura Devi’s women make a compromise to the society in order to make their suffering prominent. This creates the field of their protest where this suffering can be sighted as awareness for the other women who are still involved in this process of being a “good woman”.

In Pratham Pratisruti, Satyabati’s compromise finds a new way out in Subarnalata’s approach to her life and Subarnalata’s silent compromise somehow gives the birth of Bakul’s voice in Bakulkatha. Bakul in her early age lost her mother Subarnalata and got mentally engaged to a person named Bimal. Bimal also was in love with Bakul and wanted to marry her. In spite of that Bimal’s family did not give acceptance to Bakul and Bimal married to someone else. Bakul, being a woman was not able to stand against this decision made by both the families. She also suffered with the pain of rejection and finally decides to be single as she finds no one eligible for her love. Bakul is independent but her independence also finds the way through her compromise with the society. Bakul becomes a writer and her writing gives her the opportunity to create a discourse of her own. Interestingly this voice is of Bakul’s own but the name that Bakul is using is her pseudonym Anamika Devi. Therefore, isn’t it true that in Bakul’s case also her silence finds the voice Anamika Devi and her silence is therefore creating the voice of protest in the disguise of Anamika Devi?

Now concentrating on the writing of Bani Basu we can see that her novel Gandharbi also focuses on the character named Apala with her complicated life. Apala is a woman of twentieth century but her life revolves within that backdated outlook of her family especially of her Uncle. Apala’s life is set in the background of a middle class family where being fatherless Apala stays with her mother and brother in the house of her Uncle. Apala is blessed with exceptionally outstanding musical voice. In this novel there is a continuous conflict between Apala’s dream to become a good singer and her duties towards her family. Conservatism in the family of Apala is so prominent that Apala’s dream to maintain her singing collapsed with her marriage. Apala is a character who somehow stands as a prominent figure fought for her necessities. Before, getting married Apala finds her love Soham but remains silent. During this time Soham is suffering through his mental illness. Apala involves herself in Soham’s nursing and makes him well again. This time Apala realizes the relationship between her and Soham. Instead of going against the decision of her Uncle she accepts to be married. Apala’s husband loves Apala but Apala fails to love her husband. The physical approach of her husband towards her makes Apala realize the fact that this love is just to overpower her body. Soon Apala becomes mother but the motherly attitude that is ‘expected’ from a mother is missing in Apala’s motherhood. She only becomes a mother but fails to achieve the so called motherhood. Patriarchal notion of motherhood seems meaningless in case of Apala but her try to become a mother gives her the shock that ultimately makes her voiceless. Apala becomes a singer but she fails to achieve the place that is meant for her. Apala accepts all wrongs in her life without any complain, so we can say that Apala has that will power but she too surrenders herself towards the patriarchal norms. Apala’s son attempts suicide and that attempt makes Apala guilty of not being a ‘good mother’. In this reference Apala finds herself the cause of her son’s maladjusted behavior. This thought makes her upset and her voice is gradually affected with this shock.

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Apala’s voicelessness and her ultimate death force the reader to think that what is the protest that she is trying to make? Apala’s silence becomes the voice of the narrator, here Apala’s daughter who carefully narrates the compromise of Apala and makes a new way out for those who don’t have that capability to compromise like Apala. Apala is creating her own discourse of protest that goes through the way of silent compromise but creates her separate identity in the midst of sufferings.

The narrative of Gandharbi ends with a note that Apala is not a woman of this world. She is the woman of Gandharbyalok, a place of divine spirits in Indian Hindu mythology. The point is that the comment is made after the death of Apala as she is being glorified by her daughter as a mother. Apala certainly shouldn’t be considered as a woman of this society. Patriarchy forces her to behave accordingly and she does so. But somewhere I felt in her, a tendency to break the rules set for her. She becomes a wife but is indifferent to her husband; she becomes a mother but fails to achieve the “motherhood”. This conflict works within the mind of Apala, who is concerned for her singing. Apparently we feel that Apala also surrenders herself to the patriarchy as she marries but if we examine it very carefully then we find that Apala is acting accordingly in order to create a resistance for her own. Apala’s silence truly makes her a woman of protest. She accepts the decision made for her but she ties herself very strongly with her dream to continue singing and ultimately dies with her dream.

Ashapura Devi and Bani Basu both are writing about Bengali women but the era is different. Therefore, the problems that they are handling with have different aspects. Ashapura’s women Satyabati and Subarnalata are setting the ground for Bakul. The purpose of their posing this silent compromise is that they are trying to prepare Bakul for her coming problems and this story is not only for one Bakul but for numerous Bakuls. I am quoting from Suchorita Chattopadhyay as she quotes Ashapura Devi in her journal “Ashapura Devi’s ‘Women’- Emerging Identities in Colonial Post-Colonial Bengal” while talking about the identity of her women in the aspect of Colonial Bengal,

“The numerous Bakuls and Paruls of today’s Bengal are backed by the history of revolutions over years. It is the history of the rebellions carried out by the mothers, grand-mothers and great grandmothers of these Bakuls and Paruls. They were not many in number. There was only one or two of them. They have gone ahead on their own. They have moved ahead, crossing over caters and marshes, mounting rocks and stones, pulling out brambles on their way..... This was how the road was made; the road along which Bakul and Parul are moving ahead.” (S. Chattopadhyay)

Both the novelists portraying the characters with a will power to change their surroundings and they are trying utmost but for me this will power lacks the courage to bring a severe change in them. In this context I would like to focus on the aspect where the representation of the western women is different in western feminist discourse. The protest that they create through their discourse has a different identity as this protest is made with a voice to stand against the wrongs of the society and patriarchy but in the third world country like India this voice is somehow suppressed and their suffering finds their emancipation in ‘silent’ protest. This use of ‘silence’ among the characters of both the women novelists is very political and this paves the way of protest for their younger generations. This ‘silence’ is not the silence of the feminist narrative of the both novelists. Their narrative becomes voiced through the representation of the silent compromise of the protagonists in the novels.

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