A Critical Overview

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Abstract and Keywords

While maintaining along the lines of the ‘women’s question’, the introduction to the book, titled ‘A Critical Overview’, examines the theme of women’s position in India within the discourse on Indian feminism and as Ashapurna Devi (1909-1995) noticed in day-to-day life. The study is pursued through an exploration of the historical significance of the gender–sexuality dynamics (operational in the colonial society), which has its overbearing influence on the twenty-first century readership in understanding not only the location of women in India, but also feminism in India. Attending to the multifarious hegemony at play in society, in particular, the introduction intently examines Ashapurna’s alternative approach to challenge the power asymmetry by developing a special kind of self-sufficiency through the consolidation of female power. Ultimately the reading shows that feminism in India is a complex study of the male–female dichotomy and its allied discourses on self-other, public–private, outer–inner, etc.

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Different feminist scholarships as well as feminist literary interventions have made it sufficiently clear that flattening of differences helps to hide the contagious and exploitative nature of the varied strategies of patriarchy leading to the marginalization of women, globally as well as locally. At the same time, with the spread of ‘theoretical re-orientations’ within the academia and the intellectual circles in India, one can see indications of newer queries about women’s identity converting every tame discussion into an irresolvable debate on the distinctive nature of ‘women’s question’ in Indian feminism. The emphasis is primarily on how Western parameters of feminism broadly differ from the understanding of feminism in the non-West (here, India). In certain aspects, this volume does share a similar feeling to the uniqueness of Indian feminism and the dangers of flattening of differences. Simultaneously, it also shares the view that feminism in India existed during the pre-Independence days, although not as a separate category. It emerged as an anti-colonial struggle when women (mostly of the middle class) fought for national independence alongside men. Women in India were also supported by ‘our men’, who were leaders of the Indian National Congress, in their demands for suffrage, unlike the ‘suffragettes who had to struggle for the vote’ (Kumar 1993: 194–5; Liddle and Joshi 1985: 74). The difference, as often stated by the feminists in India, is that feminism was and still has an inclusive approach (for example, Basu 1976; Kasturi and Mazumdar 1994; Kishwar 1991; Kumar 1993). Though Ashapurna Devi’s feminism takes shape from that larger struggle, situations were not as simple as they may seem. The present study therefore looks for an effective way to address the perplexity that the ‘Other Ashapurna’, as revealed in this volume, provides us with.

The focus of this book is on reading Ashapurna Devi’s life. A foremost Indian woman-writer, Ashapurna was born in colonial Bengal in 1909. She lived till 1995, witnessing the transitions and transformations that took place in society, culture, and family life during the colonial times and after India gained political independence. However, if we do not probe the expressions of feminism as foregrounded by Ashapurna, the bio-critical understanding that continues as a primary endeavour in this study will remain incomplete. Ashapurna Devi was aware of the ‘gendered’ nature of reality. She was also aware of the idea, as Madhu Kishwar puts it, that ‘women’s rights and dignity are not alien to our society’ (cited in Chaudhuri 2004: 35). Yet, she clearly maintained in her wide-ranging works, from fiction to non-fiction writings and also in her lectures, that despite various contradictions and pressures from competing ideologies in relation to their material circumstances which constituted a complex cultural mosaic and contributed towards the process of marginalizing women, a way to independent representation and expression of identities may be initiated through the solidarity of the discriminated.

Ashapurna Devi’s comment on the cultural marginalization of women and on ways to overcome any such coercive forces is pertinent in this context.
Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency, [and this] can come only with the consolidation of female power. In our society, women often stand in the way of other women’s development. This is an inescapable truth ... [Any] agitation around the term, woman’s emancipation, will not emancipate women. What is needed is power...the power of sacrifice and detachment, the power to liberate oneself from the narrow confines of self-interest, the strength to tear apart that veil of false consciousness and to stand out in the splendour of one’s dignity ... It is important to remember that the struggle is against injustice and inequality, not against the male sex. If we have to proceed towards a better society it will not do for the two sexes to behave as if we were perpetually on a battleground...Equal rights can be ensured only when men and women have attained the same level of consciousness ... (Devi 1995b: 22–3; emphasis added)¹

Clearly, Ashapurna did not see men and women as ‘opposing parties’ (1995b: 22). Yet, in her comprehensive understanding of (p.5) the man–woman relationship, a twenty-first century reader would indeed notice a trenchant critique on certain gendered assumptions prevalent in society. In a different way, it is also as strong as the persuasive statement of Frantz Fanon on ‘man’s liberation’ from anti-colonial struggle as a ‘struggle waged by men against other men’, where women remain a signifier of national culture (1986: 48). For Ashapurna there was nothing wrong in retaining the dignity of traditional ethos and preserving the spirituality of national culture, yet with remarkable authority she attended to the complexities regarding gender-sexuality dynamics operational in society and intervened the conventional understanding about women’s struggle against injustice and inequality.

In this regard, Ashapurna anticipates Radha Kumar, and the works of others of her ilk, who have explicitly drawn attention to the history of women’s movement and feminism in India both before and after Independence which was not the ‘struggle against sex-based definitions of the “roles” of men and women’ and not a ‘display [of] the tension between sameness and difference’ (Kumar 1993: 4). This brings us to a new poser—the association between the women’s movement and feminist scholarship in India, and Ashapurna’s dynamic, poignant, and adventurous perception of ways in which women develop themselves and question society. Moreover, the imparting of a sense of solidarity as suggested by Ashapurna (quoted earlier; and which is also evident in many of her texts) invested Indian feminism with a renewed dimension of a balanced practical feminism, where human values ruled supreme, with perfect awareness of the marginalization that women experienced because they were rendered powerless.
The *self-sufficiency* that Ashapurna calls for is not only about reclaiming an agency for the self, denying the other (that is, separating women from men as social groups or Indian from a non-Indian), but also a sufficiency of the self that will begin a resistance to different forms of domination in terms of both needs and rights, with emphasis on women’s rights. In other words, the thrust is on *the emancipation of the self from the narrow confines of self-interest*, thereby posing a challenge to and insisting to move *beyond* the solidified lines of the self and the other, which are socially constructed.

While Ashapurna observes a similar global trend emerging in literary ideas and feminist discourses, sitting thousands of miles away as she comments in various places, she was aware of the local and specific problems in the institutional order which has sustained a long established colonial rule for over 200 years. (I have discussed Ashapurna’s openness to the systematic evaluation of Western work culture that would help Indian women towards improvement in the section, ‘The Voices of Invisibility’.) The trend to extend beyond the limits of the self and the other is true for almost all countries once colonized, despite the problems of impossibilities or impracticalities of ‘monolithic operations’ (Loomba 2005: 19). Certainly, anti-patriarchal issues are prominent in Ashapurna’s writings, but she was never in doubt that all patriarchal norms are historically, socially, culturally, and politically conditioned. She also believed that every feministic stance should only be justified as one conditioned by its material circumstances and specific oppressions. She moreover insisted that there could not be a generalized picture of women, what Chandra Talpade Mohanty, known for her work on third world feminism, has termed as ‘passive’ victims. As Ashapurna writes, ‘There is no end to their resentment against the ancient man, Manu. They do not have the patience to think on what pretext, under what circumstances this edict was created. At the same time, they do not try to realise why we are still adhering to the directives’ (Devi 1992a). Taking a cue from her comments, it seems difficult to avoid being cautious of the Western colonizing approach or feminist’s proprietorial attitude of universalizing homogeneity and monolithic constructs about the differences that problematize identity. (p.7) To read Ashapurna Devi in such a grain, one has to be even more cautious. This is because the situation gets far more complex since Ashapurna as an interventionist recognizes that the ‘sediments situated deep underground determine the present lie of the land’ (Chowdhury 2004: xxiv).
Ashapurna’s contestation therefore is not against the male sex who also suffered oppression during the colonial rule. By situating her suggestion towards raising consciousness, she places her plea for an even blend of thought, attitude, and action between/amongst male–female, Indian and the non-Indian in the home and the world without negating the relationship of both ‘differences’ and ‘borrowings’. The thrust is towards advancement of society in spite of the inherent contradictions (Devi 1997: 8–9). A point we cannot forego before we proceed is, as far as Ashapurna’s writings or ways of life were concerned, that there was no question of imitation. Moreover, Ashapurna was self-taught and groomed in a conservative atmosphere.

As regards Ashapurna’s access to literature, one may recall that she was confined only to the Bengali language and that the limited access she had to world literature was through the scant availability of Bengali translations of foreign works. We have discussed this later. What we need to consider at this point is that Ashapurna took a practical stance and with the kind of optimism that she nurtured throughout her life she looked beyond the self and threw herself into the future. She did not submit to the prejudices and conservatism that continued to influence the social and cultural milieu since the days of the colonial rule. In her last published novella, written a few months before her death, she observed, ‘Within the vastness of time and space, Man that is We mark this time into different fragments by calling them “present”, “past”, etc. We know that there is nothing called the “present”, because every moment experienced becomes past. We fragment them at our convenience to suit our need and what we say …’ (Devi 1995a: 155).

(p.8) Thus, according to Ashapurna, the notion of the static and timeless dimensions of Indian tradition needed an exploration within and across the space of specific cultural resources and in relation to lived experiences, which are constantly changing. Within this context of time and space, the present study will attend to certain aspects of the Indian tradition and modernity as ‘continuous flux’ and as the ‘permanent’ and ‘shifting effect’ of transition on the cultural identity of/and women’s position as posited by Ashapurna.
Adopting an optimistic view of what Ashapurna says as a point of departure, the study may seem to become complicit with the ‘silencing’ projects of patriarchy and imperialism. Ashapurna is not willing to forget the past. That she returns in her last work of fiction to the days of the antahpur (when women lived in a space of their own, although in a secluded domain) when the experiences of women were drowned in oblivion, suggest the strength and weakness of the tradition and its reflection on the present generation although, as she says, ‘such memories’ may not hold the same value for them (Devi 1995a: 155). Her deep concern about the silent side of history is also noticed in an interview with Partha Chatterjee, ‘Life moves on without a pause. Times are also changing. Along with that, even the views of life undergo a change ... but the past can never be erased from memory. Therefore, I continued writing about life; I cannot write about politics, offices or the judiciary.’

For Ashapurna to construct the future, ‘those days’ of colonial rule could not be a historical past. Rather, she was unable to underestimate ‘the psychologically tenacious hold of the colonial past on the post-colonial present’ (Gandhi 1998: 6). With such an understanding of the linear progression of time where ‘differences’ and ‘borrowings’ become a complicated process, Ashapurna opens up the debate on the place of gender in a renewed way in which we will see that the relationships between man–woman, outside–inside, West–non-West cannot (p.9) be directly oppositional to each other. My apologia to read Ashapurna is thus to re-examine and expose the tensions that run within the concealed dialectic of traditional historiography and restore the conflict and ambiguity of the historical process.

Ashapurna was sensitive to the complexities that were brought about by the colonial rule. She was aware that there was and there is no easy solution to the problem of encoding women’s cultural existence because identification of the women’s question is constantly being considered by a multiplicity of images and reflections. In the wide spectrum of responses generated by the British rule in India, Ashapurna’s evolving position eventually stood out in its conviction that the colonial situation be used creatively for the lasting benefit of the Indian people. As she deftly puts it, ‘ja dekhi tai likhi’—I write what I see (1997: 13, 17). Thus the study, while reading Ashapurna Devi’s biography, will also address the problems of how the strategic operations of cultural impositions on women (induced and accentuated by colonialism and patriarchal needs simultaneously) impinged on the gender–sexuality dynamics and the daily life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali society.
In this context it may be noticed that though Ashapurna Devi was marginalized, her position was a little different from her friends and relatives because her ‘father was an admirer of the colonial Raj’ and thus, we see she belonged to a privileged section of society (Devi 1985: 35). The study, as attempted in the following sections—‘Biography’, ‘Essays and Letters’ (selected), accompanied by a handful of supporting ‘Interviews’ (read the ‘Conversations’ as indirect form of writing)—is an endeavour to focus and analyse the feminist literary pursuit of Ashapurna Devi, which finds its universe immeasurably enriched when added to the discourses of colonial modernity. Not only was Ashapurna Devi’s life, what I would call, a silent resistance, her works, both fiction and non-fiction, filled with highly socio-cultural-sensitive (p.10) issues, also agitated the middle-class Bengali reception of the colonial ‘civilizing’ discourses in the twentieth century. They displace and appropriate the social feminist philosophy and civilizing discourses issuing from various feminist factions by representing a process of discovery of an ‘alternative voice’ to the silenced voice, leading to a historical turning point in the annals of feminist writings, in twentieth-century India.

In trying to adopt an alternative strategy to be heard, Ashapurna Devi chose to explore her marginalized position and voice it in her writings. Her agenda was to create a space for women where their plight would be voiced and consequently be transmitted in order to be heard. Thus, the ‘alternative voice’ was the space where there would be neither total silencing nor hollering, but a strategized and systematic inclusion of the ‘woman question’. The essays, especially ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answers to Problems’ substantiate the in-between stance taken by women of her times. I quote a portion from the translated version:

[…] there is a significant change in our society [and] the alteration following the Western model is quite apparent. The progress, duly complemented by an extraordinary advancement of science and technology, has resulted in a faster and more dynamic way of life .... [A]n eagerness to live independently has become more intense. This tempting option of an independent living, in turn, has given rise to complexities and conflicts never known before. A sense of overlordship and supremacy was inherent in men; but such hegemonic practices were not profound in women as they were habitually self-effacing. Even if they [women] were conscious of this difference and a sense of aspiration triggered their conscience at times, women accepted their subjugation to avoid domestic/family conflicts and maintain peace and order at home .... The present scenario is no longer the same. (1988)
Thus, as revealed, issues of power, freedom, and identity—which are essential parts of public discourse on the tensions (p.11) of social and cultural transitions and transformations—inform Ashapurna’s writings. These issues in turn open up several questions on the understanding of not only women’s position in a society under transition, but also regarding representations. For example, how can we think of literary representations in isolation to reality? That is, how can we analyse literary texts without examining the specific social and historical conditions within which such texts were generated and, importantly, the tensions of power and subjectivity? We have already seen Ashapurna’s attempt to connect the complexities of her time with her writings and we shall take up some more examples gradually. It is in the study of Ashapurna’s life and ideals as expressed through her essays and in many of her creative works that cover the changes in power structure from the colonial times to the ‘post’-colonial (Mongia 1997: 1), where we can locate her uniquely dialogic position.

Ashapurna was indeed rooted in local reality but as mentioned, she was not averse to new ideas from the West. This may espouse limitations of postcolonial representations, ‘when [we] concentrate only on the representation of the colonised or the matter of the colonies ... placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past’ (Spivak 1999: 1). That is, when the post-colonized signifies a straightforward historical break with the political, cultural, and economic domination and legacy of colonialism (Morton 2007 [2003]: 123). The present study offers a reading of Ashapurna’s question of a special kind of self-sufficiency as a challenge to the ‘compelling seductions of colonial power’ (Gandhi 1998: 4). It serves as an agency responding to the pressures of colonial encounter. The strategic position of Ashapurna Devi—the in-between and/or out-of-the-between (the period between 1909 and 1947, that is, between the British rule in India and its independence; and between 1947 and 1995, that is from post-independence till her demise)—gives us the choice to study the complex stratification of social and cultural history of colonial and postcolonial India, which, to quote Ashis Nandy, is ‘the permanent and yet the shifting point of crisis’ (1983: 62).
It may be noted here that the history of colonial India, especially when Ashapurna started to write, was not just the story of how the colonizer utilized power, it was also about the records of the negotiation and opposition of the colonized to achieve power. The idea of the mutual effectiveness of spatial strategies in relation to the differences and borrowings of the colonialism-nationalism framework, as advocated by Partha Chatterjee, therefore becomes imperative for our study on understanding and locating women’s position and thereby the ‘women’s question’. As important as the former is Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan’s defence for the coordination of mutual accountability of Indian nationalism and the women’s question, for it raises the question of the ‘politics of nationalism [that] signals the subordination if not the demise of women’s politics’ (2001: 191). Although both differ and agree as many others do on certain points on indigenous identities and problems of gender relations, which are related to fixed spatial practice as espoused by nationalists, Chatterjee, borrowing the term ‘subaltern’ from Antonio Gramsci, has shown that examinations of subalterneity/marginality are not just about their victimization. They are also about marginalized’s/subaltern’s attempt at self-assertion and their probable rise to hegemony which Antonio Gramsci explicitly mentions in his Prison Notebook. In her challenging article ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Spivak, considering the continued effect of colonialism on the present socio-political conditions, maintains that ‘the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant’ (1988: 287). She alters her views to some extent in her discussion with Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, where she talks about inserting the subaltern women into the long way to hegemony (1996: 287–308).

While the study attempts to read each one in the other, in particular it will endeavour to understand how Ashapurna articulates the tensions or the question of ‘becoming’ in her writings, in the interplay of consent and coercion that constitutes the hegemonic process.

Ashapurna is not known especially for theoretical feminism, yet her defence for ‘women as fragments of a concentric whole as men are’ (1957: 1) makes us think of her writings as a conscious effort to challenge the unthinking fixed formulas that kept women away from ‘utterance’—their power of speaking, as well as from participation in the public space. That women were considered to be the fragments of a whole, can be added to the spatial allocation of women to ‘ghar’ (the private domain) and inversely the allotment of men to ‘bahir’ (the public). At this point, can we think of reciprocal unity of thought and practice? Can we think of women as a subject of their own discourse within the colonialism–nationalism framework? Ashapurna, in fact, puts in conscious efforts to overcome the dilemmas that accompany ‘social transformations’ and returns to the root to offer her arguments, where the private–public dichotomy is shown simultaneously as distinct and yet interrelated or dependent on each other.
Life has granted Ashapurna the opportunity of knowing only a small part of the world, but she has amply investigated her limited part of the world using a kind of psychological microscope discovering that the microcosm of the family is governed by the same rules as the macrocosm of human society. To analyse these rules in all their complexities and completeness has been Ashapurna’s life’s endeavour.

(Preinhaelterova 1995: 19)

Indeed, Ashapurna represents the struggle that (mainly) the early twentieth-century Bengali middle-class women had to encounter, and also the fact that they were not simply ‘passive recipients of the welfare-enhancing help’ (Sen 2005: 222). They also did not necessarily submit to the dilemma that an individual faces with new values, ideas, or norms inside or (p.14) outside the private space. At this point, thus, I would like to clarify that the target of this project is not to hypothesize or examine the pattern that led to the emergence of a new-generation woman. Nor does the study attempt to analyse the complex metamorphosis of the nationalist discourse or foreground the inner fissures and contradictions of nationalism. The idea is to identify certain issues relating to the possibilities of women, which otherwise would have remained unresolved at a macro level.

II
To grasp the question of becoming, as articulated by Ashapurna, let us first look into the ‘problematic’ interlocking of historical conflicts that Ashapurna believed triggered the process of marginalizing women and subverting their voices. This will also explain Ashapurna’s concern for the silent side of history. For example, by way of responding to the silenced contours of the position of women in colonial India, Ashapurna observed in her preface to Pratham Pratisruti (the magnum opus which bagged the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1977), ‘... history has invariably overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. That domain has always been neglected. This book is about an unknown woman who was among those who carved out the etchings of a promise.’

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Considering this subdued/muted position of women where the acknowledgement of their experiences was concealed from the histories of colonial society, the present study should then focus not only on the contemporary expressions of feminist insight in the literature by Ashapurna, but also on the question of women’s disappearance from the public sphere. This absence, motivated and even ideologically rationalized by a long and complicated history of the nationalist and patriarchal fetishes on women’s sexuality, was mainly due to a fixation with an essentialized notion of ‘purity’. According to some of the (p.15) nationalist patriarchs, this was needed at a particular historical juncture.\textsuperscript{11} It is therefore urgent to diagnose the hidden edifice of complex ideologies that functioned within the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali society and within the constitution of culture.\textsuperscript{12}

At the turn of the century, which is the formative period of Ashapurna’s career as a writer, the historical significance of the colonial circumstances changed drastically. Women’s progress after 1914 was stalled. As Dagmar Engels, known for her work on women of Bengal, argues, ‘women’s issues were avoided at this time due to Gandhi’s deployment of women in the Independence struggle’ (Liddle and Joshi 1985: 74). Laws introduced by British administrators on the initiative of the social reformers like Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar, to ameliorate the conditions of women in India, did not progress further than the legal initiatives taken to outlaw certain abuses and remove certain restrictions on women. The way the Personal Laws were constructed and with which the state arbitrated over women’s legal rights contributed to an excessive scripturization of Hinduism, which were never a religion of the Book (Bagchi 1995: 3–8). Till the point the British could demonstrate the liberalizing influence of Western culture, Britain defended her right to rule with arguments about Western cultural superiority. Any claims regarding the advanced position of British women played an important part in the construction of this ideology.\textsuperscript{13} By liberalizing women’s position, they demonstrated the Western culture’s superiority with regard to relations between men and women. It is interesting to note here that cultural imperialism would soon take to political imperialism. The moral principle of female emancipation, which before 1914 had been used to legitimate their rule, was now ‘eschewed for the sake of political stability’. By ‘maintaining women’s subordination they could show that India was not yet fit for Independence’ (Liddle and Joshi 1985: 74). Ashapurna was aware of the tensions of the (p.16) long colonial rule and its aftermath, but her deep understanding of life made her believe that it was the combined sense of unworthiness and pride in a woman that initiated her to wake up to long-neglected pain.
Moreover, it needs to be noticed that the direction of the influence of Western images on the Indian identities also explains how the stratifying and subversive ideology that evolved from the biological differences, gave structure to the ideology of colonialism in India under British rule. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s observation is useful here: “The self-images (or “internal identities”) of Indians have been much affected by colonialism over the past centuries and are influenced—both collaterally and dialectically—by the impact of outside imagery (what we may call “external identity”) .... [that is why], Western inclination [is considerably directed towards] “distancing” Indian culture from the mainstream of Western traditions’ (Sen 2005: 139–40). It is now also possible to combine the rapacious colonial civilizing mission of the ‘modern’ or progressive over the traditional or the ‘savages’ with their non-modern cultures and traditions. Predictably, this as well reveals the strategic operations of appropriations attempted by patriarchal and colonial agencies.

Partha Chatterjee, in his influential essay ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’, observes, ‘... nationalism did in fact face up to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in “modern” society and it did provide an answer to the problems in terms of its own ideological paradigm ... in fact [nationalism] had resolved the women’s question in complete accordance with its preferred goals (1989: 237; 1993: 117; emphasis mine).

Thus, according to Chatterjee, the women’s question was negotiated within the ‘domain’ of the home which the ‘new patriarchy’ sought to refashion in its own terms by the use of what he calls ‘the ideological sieve’ through which nationalists (p.17) filtered European ideas. What the reading in this section would aspire to show is how Ashapurna interrogates those attempts by offering a feminist critique of male ordering. Further, how the situations in the public front, especially the First World War, helped in shaping Ashapurna’s intellectual and emotional character is worth studying. I shall take the second query first. Although not directly related to the ‘women’s question’, the search is within the nationalist ideology itself as explicated by Chatterjee. Commenting on the uncertainties of everyday middle-class family life during the colonial period, Ashapurna writes, ‘Every discussion in our family ended in a debate on the “war” and its consequence leading to price escalation in the market. Water tax was implemented. Constant warnings kept us alert, “do not misuse the tap water”. The war was between Germany and England, why rationing of water in Calcutta?’ This observation is quickly juxtaposed by, ‘My father was a staunch admirer of the “Raj” and my mother a resolved, dedicated “swadeshi”’ (1985: 35).
As revealed, the situation is not simply about ‘emotive issues of political struggle’ (Chatterjee 1989: 237). Neither is it simply a returning to the ‘raw’ political experiences and the troubled and/or troubling relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It is also an example of recollections of compelling seductions of colonial power as mentioned before. Leela Gandhi points out that the ‘mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter’ (1998: 4). The situation as exposed by Ashapurna encapsulates the tensions and contradictions of the time between the colonizer and the colonized within the overarching atmosphere of colonialism and emerging nationalism in India. Rebutting Terry Eagleton, Ania Loomba emphasizes on the question of whether within ‘postcolonial thought’ one is ‘allowed to talk about cultural differences, but not—or not much—about economic exploitation’ (2005: 3). (p. 18) Through a brief vignette of her autobiographical reminiscences, Ashapurna has brilliantly summed up the economic downturn that the colonized society was facing then (in spite of a large amount of capitalist penetration in colonial Bengal) and how the outside atmosphere influenced the day-to-day family life.

Being cognizant from quite a tender age of how gender issues at home were shaped by economics, politics, and culture outside, Ashapurna observes, ‘memories are very strange things. They remain dormant if we do not recollect them from time to time. But once awoken, memories go on unfurling without restraint’ (1985: 33). Ashapurna’s recollection of the contradictory winds in the family also brings to the fore how and what a child apprehends, which are sometimes the indelible impressions of the gender conflicts that a child of either sex learns to contend with quite early in life. In fact, in her poem ‘Bairer Dak’ (A Call from Outside), which was her first expression in the world of writing, one cannot miss her urge to respond to a call from the outside.
The fact that girls/women were ‘unfree’ is quite blatantly suggested in the title of the poem. The content quite ironically suggests that she is calling one and all (all her brothers and sisters) to have a gala time in the open space—outside the constrained atmosphere of the home. ‘Come out all boys and girls ... with smiles on your face’. Ashapurna was then approximately thirteen years old and unmarried. From Ashapurna’s firsthand experience we get to know the oppression all children suffered during the colonial times. Of course, there are other instances where she remembers how the boys in family and society got priority over the girls and how she experienced the outside world by looking out upon it through the ‘window’ (1997: 42). The heart of all her arguments, though, communicates a sense of solidarity. As a whole, her move was towards an equitable society. I have discussed her insightful observations on gender segregation and the need for solidarity later and in Part I of ‘Silence and Its Contours’, and will not go into details here. All that we need to remember for the moment is what Chatterjee explains as the ‘disappearance’ of the issue of female emancipation from the ‘public agenda’ by the end of the nineteenth century as the result of nationalism’s ‘refusal to make the women’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state’ (1993: 248–9).

At this point, we may recall that the social reforms, especially regarding the ‘women’s question’, that were initiated in the early and mid-nineteenth century and continued in smaller forms thereafter ‘bowed out largely due to conflicting claims of colonialism and nationalism’. ‘Official nationalism swept in as a challenge to the cultural supremacy of the colonizer and replaced the earlier social concerns of the reform movement with renewed concerns’ (Datta 2004: 328). The reshaping took place in the process of exchange—both in the process of political and ideological exchange in the creation of Indian nationalism. In my 2001 study on Santa Devi (1893–1984) and Sita Devi (1895–1974), who hailed from the Brahmo faction of Hindu liberal upper middle class family in Bengal, I have discussed the notion of a ‘difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity in the West’. The important points for which I bring in Santa Devi and Sita Devi in this discussion are: First, Ashapurna cherished the sisters’ ‘richness of thought and [their] interesting way of writing’ (Datta 2004: 327). Second, the roles played by women (and men) from varied strata were different. Thus, the manifestation of Ashapurna’s experience and her ways of life in a conservative Hindu middle-class society could not be similar to the position and experience of the Chatterjee sisters (as Santa Devi and Sita Devi were commonly known) who belonged to a special strata of middle-class Indian society and grew up in a liberal atmosphere under the Brahmo influence. What needs to be noticed at this point is that, in spite of the difference in decorum maintained in a multilayered Indian society, ‘in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence’ was upheld by all, although in different ways (Chatterjee 1993: 156).
The main trend of the nationalist agenda, as observed by Chatterjee, was to retain the ‘spiritual superiority’ of the colonized over the ‘material superiority’ of the colonizer (1989: 237–9; 1993: 120). The onus of retaining the traditional culture of the nation, which was defined as nurturing the ‘spiritual distinctiveness’ of the ‘national culture’, was on women. The new model was fixed by constructing an ‘inspirational model of the past’, ‘when women [were] educated and composed hymns and participated in learned debates’ (Ray 2002: 40; Sangari 1989: 18). However, according to Partha Chatterjee ‘that was now a “classicised” tradition—reformed, reconstructed’ (1993: 127). The women of India were ensured freedom, but that was highly synonymous with the freedom of maintaining the traditional ‘spiritual’ (feminine) ethos within the defined ‘inner’ space—the ‘ghar’/the home.

III

This anti-colonial social space thus introduced as one aspect of the nationalist project by our men was to protect the ‘the inner spiritual self, our true identity’ and our women—its representation from the ‘encroachments by the colonizer ... in the inner sanctum’. The ‘outer’ space of the ‘material’ interests, the ‘bahir’/the world, remained ‘typically the domain of the male’ ‘where practical considerations reign[ed] supreme’ and ‘where the battle would be waged for national independence’ (1989: 238–9; 1993: 120–1; emphasis mine). We get two pictures from this reading. One, for instance, a clear-cut ‘separation of the social space into ghar and bahir’ (1989: 238; emphasis in the (p.21) original) both exclusive of the other, and the second, a gendered division—where the ‘women’ were labelled as repositories of the ‘home’ and ‘men’ were subsumed to face the treacherous terrain, that is, the ‘world’. In brief, the responsibility of retaining the traditional culture of the nation, which was defined as nurturing the spiritual quality of national culture, was on women and home was seen as ‘nation’ in its embryonic form. The reintroduction of the traditional culture that was posited by the nationalists to maintain the ‘cultural identity’ and signify the ‘difference’ from the rulers led to several restrictions on women’s participation in the public sphere or the area outside the demarcated area of protection (Bagchi 1995: 4). Thus, this mode of reintroducing traditional culture in which recasting of women took in various forms, created unease amongst generations of feminists and continues till date. Maitreyee Chaudhuri remarked, ‘during the colonial period the negotiation led to a trend of essentialising “Indian culture” and a construction of an image of recasted Indian womanhood as an epitome of that culture ... however, the internal differences cannot be overlooked’ (2004: xix). Ashapurna, while observing several times in her early essays about the gargantuan chasm between masculine and feminine values that separated the daughters from the sons in society and within the family, reiterated it in her 1989 essay and, being critical about the dowry issues, questioned the unchanging patriarchal attitude.
With time the functional aspects of social architecture changed, but to what extent? How could women imagine their freedom in such a social architecture thus constructed by the ‘nationalist patriarchy’? Ashapurna continued to write in that atmosphere of complexities and contentions and offered a rich account of how, through the combined process of reconciliation with and resistance to patriarchal ideology, women were able to initiate changes and challenge the system from ‘within’. In her ‘intergenerational trilogy’, to use Bagchi’s term, which (p.22) includes Pratham Pratisruti, Subarnalata,18 and Bakulkatha,19 Ashapurna has shown in a detailed manner what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society and the daily struggles of middle-class women to change their status from being marginal to acquiring a voice. However, as she shows in Subarnalata (1967), it was not a history of ‘begging’ or ‘pleading’. India has its own cultural resources and women, at least a few of them, have proved their intellectual acumen and their might in anti-colonial struggles. Indian women’s revenge, at least during her time, was not on the male sex, but against the system of injustice that ruled over class, caste, and gender. Take, for instance, Satyabati’s appeal for justice from the British police:

Just tell me why you’ve opened your courts of justice? In our country we used to kill our women by burning them on their husband’s funeral pyre, you stopped that practice and saved us from that sin. But that’s nothing! There are heaps of sins that have collected over centuries. If you can rid us of those, only then would I say that you deserve to be law-makers. Why have you taken on the guise of ruler in another’s land? Why can’t you just huddle into your ships and leave? (Chowdhury 2004: 484)
It is quite clear from the above assertion of Satya, or Satyabati (the eternal truth seeker), that ‘she rages on about inadequate social measures’. Ashapurna, through Satyabati, lifts the veil of the prevalent double standards in Bengali society in pre-Independence India and constructs women’s demands around women’s domestic, beyond the domestic, and issues regarding domestic and against social oppression. But she was reminded of her misplaced hope on the colonial masters. Master Bhabotosh Biswas, Satyabati’s and her husband Nabakumar’s English teacher, makes Satyabati aware of the need for developing self-responsibility in building up a nation and her ‘naïve faith in colonial justice and reform’. Biswas, commenting on Satyabati’s demand for justice from the colonial masters and her hope that their laws would remove (p.23) the social ills, says, ‘that’s a task for us’ (Chowdhury 2004: 485). From his slanting remark we can draw that Ashapurna makes her readers conscious about the fact that through the legislation of pro-women laws, the colonial state has proved its administrative pragmatism, but as far as implementations and social transformations were concerned it had to be worked out from ‘within’ our own cultural models of society. In fact, with awareness of women’s issues during the days of the anti-colonial struggle, ‘the independence of the country and of women [had] become so intertwined as to be identical’. Correspondingly, it is through the same master that the congratulatory response of the officer to Satyabati’s courage is conveyed.

Thus, without rejecting hope on the colonial masters, Ashapurna emphasizes that it was the responsibility of the nationalists to retain the identity of the home-India and strengthen women’s position from the dominant idea of the Indian woman as an ‘oppressed subject’. The process can start from familial relationships in Indian homes and by maintaining kinship bonds to broaden mutual support and thereby create a sense of community. According to Ashapurna,

\[\text{Literature emanates from certain trends and traits of society and is a reflection of the culture. They run on parallel tracks and that they are mirrors of one another reflecting and refracting optimally, trying to outdo the other. Thus, to confirm that it was good before and is bad now is not reasonable; it would be better to acknowledge that they are mutually exclusive,}\]

\[\text{which is only natural ... and social trends are dynamic like life itself ... .}\]

While narrating Satyabati’s story, Ashapurna reflects on the oral tradition of recollecting history and reminds us of those forgotten mothers whose stories are not documented. Her ‘aunts’ told the story of Satyabati to her and she repays her debts by attempting to etch the lives of those women, which were shrouded in darkness.
A space was created for women by a woman. Satyabati showed the possibility of a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel. The distance covered was miraculous. The time was around the latter half of nineteenth-century Bengal, when Calcutta was the capital of colonial India. In laying the road Satyabati might have overstepped the boundaries and contended with ‘ethical dilemmas’ such as moving out from the joint family system, from her in-laws place in a village named Baraipur (which according to her had no culture but agriculture), to the city of Calcutta and learning English from Master Bhabotosh during the colonial times when the reviving of vernacular literature was gaining primacy. This was possible for Satyabati partially because her father Ramkali would patiently listen to his daughter’s observations and ‘reflect on the ways in which atrocities were masqueraded as social custom and traditional practice’ (Chowdhury 2004: xix). Her father acknowledged her unflinching approach to truth, but seeking truth formed the core of her character. Satyabati, like a true Indian woman, maintained the emotional needs of a family life. She attended to the daily grinds of household matters meticulously and at last took her ‘own self into consideration’ and became self-sufficient at the same time (Chowdhury 2004: 531).

For thirty years of her married life, Satya provided genuine care to the family members. She did not mind calling a ‘Sahib’ (non-Indian) doctor to treat her ailing husband, Nabakumar, despite the obvious ridicule that she endured. She was also extremely alert about the need for education and thus she would not allow her daughter Subarnalata to remain uneducated. At the same time, she refused to expose her children, including her sons, to the extravagant lifestyle of the ‘wealthy’ Calcuttans (Chowdhury 2004: 335). She proved that even by attending to the daily grinds of household matters one could earn a keep and have a space of her own through sheer motivation. Satyabati, after moving to Calcutta, took the opportunity of living in a nuclear family and taught adult women. Thereby, she showed the possibility that there can be an extension of the ‘given’ domain. However, in order to retain that possibility, education should be promoted which has the potential to extend boundaries.
According to Partha Chatterjee, ‘attainment by her own efforts by her own superior national culture was the mark of woman’s newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women’s question’ (1993: 127). In *Pratham Pratisruti (The First Promise)* what Ashapurna Devi reminds us is that the ‘unknown’ girl Satyabati who was given away in marriage at the age of eight to maintain the social norms was kept under strict surveillance of brahmanical regulations. Yet, with a ‘nose-ring dangling, heavy anklets round her feet’ Satyabati continued the struggle for years at every step battling against family control, mental violence of the *kulin* polygamy, and social prejudices, to build the ‘road on which the Bakuls and Paruls (the third generation women, that is, Satyabati’s granddaughters) are striding ahead’ (Chowdhury 2004: 2). Satyabati was not aware that she was making history; yet, the road was built. It is worth noticing that these women, as Ashapurna claims—our ‘mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers’—were a few individuals among many but not alone. It was a collective effort of building the roads and the pledge to move forward towards the mission. But such struggles do not find a place in the pages of history.

Satyabati’s last letter to her daughter Subarnalata is another fine example of the dynamism that Indian women were endowed with and the patience with which such women answered themselves ‘staking their claim where they [were] not allowed to tread’ (Mazumdar 1997: 159). I quote small portions from her letter. Satyabati writes:

(p.26) Having analysed human behaviour time and again, I know now that it is easy enough to judge others harshly. Those who appear to do wrong, or what in others’ eyes might constitute a crime, do not always act with a deliberate intent to harm. Most acts out of ignorance are simply because they are misled. However, when such ignorance clashes with the saving of a young and innocent life, it is not easy to maintain calm .... What is needed is patience. No task can be completed unless one is willing to move with care and with endless patience .... I started a school for girls soon after my arrival here [in Varanasi] .... When I first started, I had to beg people to send their girls. Now a lot of people bring their daughters voluntarily. The need to educate women has begun to be felt by many (Mazumdar 1997: 158, 159, 160).
Thus, from Ashapurna’s perspective it was not right to lay blame on all men or on all those we think are unjust to women. What was needed was a change in the process of upbringing and socialization. For her there was no question of revenge as far as a man–woman relationship was concerned. The primary effort should be to overcome ignorance, which is the real enemy to the progress of society. When god created the opposite sexes, ‘in His eyes they were not different; and certainly, one was not created just to serve the other’ (Devi 1967: 160). Women like Satyabati and Subarnalata had clear perceptions of their marginalization. Yet, they would never dream of a world where men are treated as their enemy. ‘In time, men will learn this important lesson. But that is not all’ (Devi 1967: 160). Women too have to learn their lessons. If a change has to be brought about, women too have to make an effort to overcome not only the patriarchal culture that has created a gulf between the sexes but also the complexities of the material/spiritual dichotomy. For Ashapurna, the patriarchal culture is the colonizer. Therefore it is with ‘patience, endurance and forgiveness’ that women have to fight together with men just as they might struggle collectively for the freedom of the country (Devi 1967: 160).

(p.27) IV

A slight digression would be useful here to understand Ashapurna and her feminist insight better. That would also enable us to understand the indigeneity of Indian Feminism which helped and was helped by the new nationalist patriarchy to overcome ‘the colonial situation’. The often contradictory pull from the local culture and the colonial forces resulting in an interlacing conflict between societies and cultures is not new to colonial history. In nineteenth-century India, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay claimed, ‘We have no history! We must have a history!’ (cited in Chatterjee, Partha 1993: 76). This assertion of Bankimchandra instead had a different implication, as explained by the absence of a ‘true history’ of India and its past. Amongst several explanations, the one that would be useful here is his claim for a history of the glorious deeds of our ancestors, of our forefathers that was not distorted by foreign interpretations. That I quote Bankimchandra at this juncture is not to suggest a justification for the ‘conditions’ and the ‘limits’ of such an agenda that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century to explain the ‘women’s question’ as thought out by Ashapurna.
Feminism according to Ashapurna, as depicted in the previous section, is traced to the days of the antahpur culture where women revolted against the injustices of patriarchy and paved the way towards their emancipation. But that remained as an ‘absent history’. It was a struggle, which the women of the West did not have to experience. In this respect, Indian women’s movement sharply differs from the suffragette movement to which much of Western feminism owes its roots. Indian women were under double subjugation if not more. During the days of the nationalist anti-colonial movement, the division of the social space became more rigid for women as they were under (i) the colonial rule (ii) and were also under the male family (p.28) heads. Here we must keep in mind that the elderly women too were also powerful heads in joint families.

Currently, the concern is Ashapurna’s contention about the ‘secluded inner domain’. According to her, the antahpur/inner precinct or the secluded inner domain is as ‘clamorous’ as the outer domain that is ‘the public world’. But the history of times past tells us about the rise and fall of the public world which is exclusively maintained as the men’s domain, and has overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world—preserved as fixed and static domain for women, not to be encroached by the ‘outside real politics’. Ashapurna challenges this programmed seclusion of women and questions ‘were not this space similarly broken and built like the public?’ (Devi 1997: 12). She places her argument against the neglect very blatantly and demands focus on that muted domestic space which according to her holds ‘our inspiration, ardour, and excitement for the future’ (Devi 1976). She observes,

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay has mostly written historical and cultural texts but they are representative of love, sorrow, hatred and self-sacrifice rather than the domestic space. The areas where women have revolted from the confines of the antahpur have been silenced and this too was a major source of inspiration. On the other hand, Saratchandra had been able to perceive the condition of women and their subtle rebellion against it.

Ashapurna regards Saratchandra as her precursor.

About her own writings, she comments,

It was not the union of souls or love or separation that gained primacy in my works, but the pained and stifled souls under the rigours of domestic life and society. Alongside I have tried to paint a picture of the constant restructuring of the antahpur from where the society, generations and the mentality of the masses begin to get influenced. (Deb 1991)
Indeed, it was a bold departure from the traditional norms. To talk back was not only beyond the acceptable social norms, (p.29) but to critique Bankimchandra? That she could, was obviously because she was ‘a profound admirer of Bankimchandra’ (Majumdar 1987). She claims that she ‘always felt like re-reading his entire book even after reading it a hundred times’ because that was a major source of inspiration (Majumdar 1987). Ashapurna valued the plurality of the difference that Bankimchandra’s claim suggests. At the same time, she instals a similar claim for a ‘true history’ of our glorious foremothers who have carved out the etchings of a promise from within those ignored interior spaces of Bengal without taking an exclusionary route.27 Thus, to read Ashapurna within Bankimchandra’s agenda as observed by Ranajit Guha and later by Partha Chatterjee, would be to risk both simplification and rigidity.

Ashapurna Devi’s incessant curiosity was to comprehend human relationship in all its complexities. The rationale that categorized women and their experience as ‘inferior’ to men’s or that ‘[they] she must be something higher than what she is [they are]’ intrigued her throughout. Whatever may be the reason, remarked Ashapurna, it is a fact that women have always been ‘forced away from the real world into the seclusion of a helpless and dispossessed life’ (1995b: 19). Women and the domain that circumscribe them are already constructed and no method thereby would provide an ‘analytical space’ for an understanding of experience. By examining the antahpur culture, Ashapurna has offered a sharp critique of the totalizing claims of the nationalist narrative and the harmful cultural position that has been relegated to women. One also cannot help noticing in her observations, borrowing from the noted Indian feminist Jasodhara Bagchi, how heavily the entire scenario was ‘interpellated by colonialism’ (1995: 2).

Ashapurna moves beyond the patriarchal barriers and provides us with an understanding of experience, which is informed and defined by a particular history of social culture as well as the historically and culturally constructed gendered category of a woman. This (p.30) strategic move also suggests a critical and continual reflection on the perception of the antahpur and its fully pragmatic use for a political purpose.
Thus, for Ashapurna, the antahpur culture that prevented women from becoming visible to the public and the questions that emerged from that invisible world of daily life—which are too intricate—needs to be delineated and analysed in terms of the notions of lived experience and the difference that constituted them outside the politics and disallowed women to participate outside. To be au fait with her feminism, what she writes about the ‘society’, the ‘culture’ during the colonial period, and the colonial aftermath is our important inquiry. As much important to us is the understanding of the male authors from her point of view. We have partly noticed that in the portion quoted above. In this respect, Ashapurna departed from the other women of her times for in this case it was a woman speaking about men who were nationalists rather than the nationalist men speaking for/about women, which was the norm. This ‘new’ freedom, according to Partha Chatterjee, has been accorded to women by the ‘new nationalist patriarchy’ that ‘had to be normalised’, enabling women to speak for themselves (1993: 133).

Having placed a brief record of feminist historiography, which Ashapurna Devi emphasizes has its roots in the antahpur, it is important for our study that we focus now on the ‘subject-positional politics’, the central argument of which veers around ideological coding. It may be noted here that the time Ashapurna was writing, the anti-colonial nationalist movement (the swadeshi movement) in Bengal had already taken its way to free India from the British rule and the Gandhian movement was on. Groups of women participated in the struggle. They flouted traditional norms and entered the exclusive male domain of politics (Kumar 1993; Ray 1991). Ashapurna was not an active participant in the anti-colonial struggle. But, she sensitively absorbed the complexities of her time from quite a tender age and voiced (p.31) it in her writings. As she matured, her writings took the form of activism. Narrating that period in which she grew up, Ashapurna observes, ‘The era that I have experienced and the one in which I have grown up is the one depicted in Subarnalata … the plot of all my writing is inspired by real life incidents’ (Deb 1991). Perhaps it is the immediacy of experience of the anti-colonial struggle that enabled Ashapurna to convey so magnificently the angst of being a woman and the complexities of the time in her writings. Consider the unfolding in Subarnalata: ‘the expression of the unspoken question that lay heavy within the entire race of oppressed womankind’, ‘Is that age over now? Who can tell? Who knows what darkness lurks behind the dazzling glow of progress and liberation in which thousands of enlightened women bask today? … Who has the courage to answer that question?’ (Mazumdar 1997: 61). Or,

One of the children [of Subarnalata, the eponymous heroine] replied,

‘We are destroying the symbol of oppression. We’ll stop wearing these stupid English garments …’
Prabhas: ‘Fighting the British, are you? And who is your leader? Your mother? Very well, then why is she still indoors? ... Let me go and inform the Viceroy he is about to lose his job!’ (Mazumdar 1997: 75)

Ashapurna’s capacity to weave the domestic and the public domains of politics demonstrates the importance of anti-colonial nationalism in the consolidation of feminism in the Third World. She comments, ‘the sarcasm in his words did not upset Subarnalata at all’ ... [S]he spoke... forgetting totally that that amounted to breaking another taboo’ (Mazumdar 1997: 75). Prabhas, Subarnalata’s husband’s brother, could not believe his eyes that ‘what he had witnessed often enough in the streets’ was being ‘repeated’ in his own house (Mazumdar 1997: 75). Ashapurna describes ‘all the pent up rage and frustration that had built up over the years’ through Subarnalata, and recalls (p.32) how her mother Saralasundari adjusted with the conflicting claims of the patriarchal system and still retained her firmness without risking the ‘self-identity of national culture’.29 Later, in an interview, Ashapurna agrees, ‘Many times people have told me that there are parallels between my mother and the character of Subarnalata and I have never denied it—she has always been very firm and adamant and has given a lot of importance to principles (Deb 1991).30 To Ashapurna, her mother Saralasundari was bold and steadfast, and ‘traditionally modern’—educated and accomplished, carrying the ‘essential’ marks that the nationalists posited as the authentic culture (Chatterjee, Partha 1989: 237). Saralasundari was a great source of inspiration for Ashapurna.
Thus, as we read Ashapurna Devi primarily as a twentieth-century writer, we will have to move freely between the two centuries. Ashapurna, as we see often, returns to the nineteenth century to draw precedents. The impact of the colonial encounter continues and cannot be compartmentalized in the tight box of time. Therefore, to read Ashapurna’s life and analyse her feminism today, it is essential that we ‘understand selfhood as a historically constituted entity’ (Chaudhuri 2004: xxx). It is through anti-colonial nationalism that feminism paved its way in India. Feminism, for Ashapurna, did not need a separate domain. Rather, Indian feminism and Indian nationalism reinforced each other in a constructive way. In Subarnalata Ashapurna has shown that the central protagonist was convinced that ‘the independence of women is intrinsically linked with the independence of the country when basic values will change, when there will be a new identity for all, and vice versa’ (Sen 1997: viii). Indeed, Indian feminism was submerged in the freedom struggle or the struggle for independence of the country for a long time. As Amartya Sen says, ‘[T]here has been a higher involvement of women in leadership positions in the Indian struggle for independence than in the Russian or Chinese (p.33) revolutionary movements, and the Congress party had women Presidents fifty years earlier than any major British political party’ (2005: 234). During the years after India’s independence in 1947, liberal nationalist feminism was neatly contained in the programmes of the Congress government, although there were various changes in the concept and formation of feminism in later phases.

Much has certainly changed under the aegis of post-Independence history. ‘This is the world of women that reformers sought to change’, the space that did change to some extent as India moved through various phases of social, economic, and political modifications, from a ‘colonised country to a capitalist democracy after 1947’ (Banerjee 2002: 190). According to Ashapurna, ‘the new-generation woman’ is remarkably proceeding from one victory to another, depending on nothing but her own enthusiasm and indomitable will. Also, the Indian woman has acquired her right to participate in the activities of the outer world and also in a single generation, the ‘caged birds’ have learned to wing their way to the sky. In fact, Ashapurna emphasizes: ‘And what exactly has the new woman been able to achieve?’ It is wiser to ask the question the other way round. ‘What hasn’t she achieved?’ ... ‘But is it only the outer world? ... She makes her home ... meets the demands of social life .... And she is also the mother of her child.’ With all this work some brave foremothers carried on their struggle during the pre-Independence days and ‘have fought day and night to wrest those legal and social rights which were always withheld from women’ (1995b: 19–23). Ashapurna, therefore, would dedicate her ideas of the root of feminism to the anti-colonial struggle. Yet, she puts in a cautious remark, ‘During our time, the terms, “feminist” “feminism” were not in vogue.’
For Ashapurna, feminism is a philosophy and the subsequent application of the philosophy to practical needs to enhance the condition of living of the women of India along with men and children. She insisted that women should have equal power ‘outside’, but, that should not happen at the cost of segregating man from woman. If India has to assert its identity, the urgent need was to establish a collective effort. Obligation towards kinship bonds will create new relationships and the reverse would happen if a divided mentality were pursued. India is known for its family bonds and that had acquired a special significance in the nationalist mind. Ashapurna treasured that tradition. For that she did not deter from emphasizing on the needs specific to women. She was deeply concerned about the trials and tribulations women endured for ages.

Reflecting on the retrogressive effects of patriarchal roles, whether it was for imposition of certain ideals or for the need of protection, she insisted that there should not be any dogma about it. For Ashapurna, who had witnessed the anti-colonial struggle, to detach the self-identity from Indians (as a collective) was difficult. Simultaneously, it was equally difficult for her to overlook the ‘ticklish problem’, as Chatterjee puts it, or the ‘tricky’ question of choice that women had to put up with—the prescriptive regulations, political and social patterns that women negotiated with to make an entry into the public space. What is needed as far as the women’s question is concerned, is to conceptualize freedom differently as much as selfhood. With the burgeoning of official nationalism which had started a new form of revolution, the notion of freedom underwent changes. Ashapurna tracks the simultaneity of changes and continuity in the social and cultural life in Bengal, which had its deep impact on the middle-class daily life. She believed that despite the interlocking of historical circumstances, women became the subject of their own discourse and that was not alien to the dominant nationalist discourse. But, the battle for recognition of difference of women’s position, or broadly, women’s question, needs to be worked out independently. People ultimately matter more than arguments over opinion and this gives Ashapurna’s thoughts about a special kind of self sufficiency a deeply humane and relevant texture as well as a vision which finds its resonance in the words of Jayawardena, ‘feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West’ (1986: 2). Indeed, feminism in India arose in historical contexts of ‘material and ideological changes that affected women’.

V
While anti-colonial struggle formed an integral part of Ashapurna’s feminist interventions, it is important to recognize the legacy of the anti-colonial nationalist Gandhi, and how his example of non-violent protest against British rule inspired many women to merge into the nationalist movement in their own ways. Ashapurna may be seen as one of those examples. In her life, Ashapurna saw how ‘Bharat’ was stormed by imperialistic rule, how ‘Hindusthan’ was colonized and divided at the same time by the intensity of the civilizing mission, and how ‘India’ gained its way to solidarity—in the words of Gopal Krishna Gandhi, ‘a [moving] away from the British Empire towards Indian nationhood’. Supporting Gandhiji’s condemnation and a plea for self-rule, Ashapurna wheeled the charkha as a mark of her protest against the British rule. She even tried her hand at spinning a few saris on the charkha, during her pre-marital days. In this regard we can be guided by Benita Parry’s warning against ‘the tendency to disown work done within radical traditions other than the most recently enunciated heterodoxies, as necessarily less subversive of the established order’ (1987: 27). As in Subarnalata, Ashapurna has discussed about Gandhi’s role in bringing certain changes in the social mentality. Indeed, Gandhi’s role in restoring the consciousness in woman as an individual self is significant.

When new ideological constructs were putting further burden on women to retain the ‘sanctity’ and ‘purity’ of the home, Gandhi by returning to the authentic past expressed his faith on woman, and showed the way to ‘self-generation’, that ‘she’ could become the ‘arbitrator’ of her own destiny and play a positive role in moulding the public life (Kishwar 1985: 1691). If we look back into Ashapurna’s self-assertions in her essays (‘Why I Was Never Called Out into the World of Work?’ ‘Why Should I Not Try to Discover My Real Worth?’) we can relate it to the Gandhian understanding of ‘freedom’ as the ‘birth right of every individual’ (Kishwar 1985: 1691). In fact, Ashapurna’s struggle against injustice and inequality and not against the male sex, has a strong parallel with the Gandhian ideology of man–woman relationship which he tried to establish through the utilization of extended domestic feminine space into the world of men and public affairs.

Gandhi said, ‘It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide’ (Kishwar 1985: 1691). Again, Gandhi’s assessment of ‘fear’ and ‘helplessness’ of women as culturally imposed by society that ‘kept women crippled’, which is indeed a departure from the colonial assumptions of women as ‘dependent subjects’, was potentially encouraging for Ashapurna who sought freedom from the interiorized ‘subordinated segregation’ to an open space of knowledge and public life.
Moreover, that ‘both men and women used the “charkha” obligatorily’ indicates that there was a shift in ‘meaning and resonance among the traditional practices of women’ (Sarkar 1987: 2014). Women were reassured of their active influence in society as an individual. Unarguably, Gandhi gave crucial importance ‘to the issue of women’s freedom and strength to build a humane and exploitation free society. Gandhi saw women not as objects of reform and humanitarianism but as self-conscious subjects who could, if they chose, become arbitrators of their own destiny’ (Kishwar 1985: 1691). In this regard, Ashapurna’s succinct remark deserves to be considered in terms of Gandhian (p.37) enlightenment, ‘The very word “woman” is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is. And so she is never asked to take part in the incessant activity of this workaday world’ (1995b: 19).

Ashapurna seems to identify with the break that Gandhi created within the system. Gandhi’s ‘less ideological’ emphasis on ‘women’s strength’, and the ‘power’ to take on ‘equal tasks to perform in the achievement of freedom’, ‘empowered women’ to proclaim the specificity of their particular historical experience and also facilitated them to resist social and gender hierarchical discourse (Kishwar 1985: 1691). Moreover, when ‘women’s militancy was always sharply censured’, to borrow a line from Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1993: 181), Gandhi inculcated in women, with a ‘difference’, the consciousness of their power, which remained dormant in them as they were caught between ‘the double oppression’ of a native patriarch and of a foreign masculinist imperialist ideology (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 40). In fact, Gandhi’s conscious attempt to connect the private and the public life provided a constructive space for ‘man–woman relationship’ which was rooted in the ideals of Indian tradition as well as went through an ‘arduous process of change’.

His faith on women as ‘a potential force to build a new social order’ can be said to have offered Ashapurna a spirit of what Elleke Boehmer has termed as ‘self-transforming agency’ (2005: 32). In addition, it perhaps also gave her a balanced communicative space to transcend the patrilineal model for femininity—a space from where she could imagine of a special kind of self-sufficiency. Ashapurna said, ‘if we want [the] state of things to change, we must have a strong sense of solidarity. ... It hardly adds to the glory of emancipated women who have to depend on men at every step’ (1995: 22–3). Elsewhere, commenting on the man–woman relationship, she said, ‘The type of society in (p.38) which both men and women will be free to assert their own rights with dignity as individuals, is yet to be born ....’ It is quite evident that Ashapurna Devi was juxtaposing her material existence with a ‘gender-neutral’ method of enquiry for which she struggled all through her life.
A close reading of the assertions brings out certain distinctive qualities of Ashapurna’s zeal and her feministic thoughts. One can also read that as an attribution to a Gandhian way of thinking, associated with a new meaning akin to ‘bravery’ and ‘courage’ and ‘not the monopoly of men’ (Kishwar 1985: 20). But as Ashapurna insists, the betterment of society can come only with the ‘conscious development of both sexes’. In this regard, not only is the male identity to be asserted afresh, but also the female identity is significant and requires renovation. The spontaneous, innovative, and bold attempt of Ashapurna certainly demonstrates her thoughts on women’s question as a developed rendition of complex dimensions, both socio-cultural and political, heralding a new dimension in Indian feminism without surrendering her local identity. Ashapurna, with her systemic interventionist move into the cognitive structures within the normalizing discourse of the emerging patriarchy, actually succeeds in articulating a feminist voice. Her’s was an outspoken woman’s voice appreciative of ‘freedom’ from the ‘shackles of domesticity’ and ‘fearlessness’ and not merely of the helplessness of women in a male-dominated society.
Of course, Ashapurna’s proclamations can be interpreted as being influenced by the strategic move of Gandhi towards mass mobilization. It can also be said that Gandhi’s insistence on the ‘autonomy of women’, and their learning of ‘the primary right of resistance’, retaining ‘the inviolability of personal dignity’, inculcated in Indian women that they can take the task of their ‘upliftment into their own hands’ (Kishwar 1985: 1692; Mazumdar 2001: 58). This had influenced Ashapurna. That a woman could become an ‘arbitrator of her destiny’ and could step out of the (p.39) ‘shackles of domesticity’ and determine with authority what she needs, was perhaps a defining moment for Ashapurna as she always felt women should try to discover her real ‘worth’. Yet, it must be noted that Ashapurna was never an active participant in the independence movement; neither, for that matter, did she even actively support Gandhi’s mass mobilization. Rather, it can be said that upholding the spirit of Gandhi and his defence for the innate positive force in women in developing the society, Ashapurna directed herself to advance in the process of ‘self-making’. She also worked out her ‘silent resistance’ in her own way. Ashapurna welcomed and appreciated ‘women who have broken away from the four walls of their rooms and have spread their wings in the sky’ (Bagchi 1995: 7). Evidently, this appreciation goes against the primary assumption of women as a ‘dependent subject’; at the same time the specificity of her proclamation allows us to think of the transformations, which were taking place in the world of women. We can also think of a way to independent representations and expressions of identities, which may be found through ‘solidarity of the discriminated’, but to what extent? Have the transformation processes offered women a platform or a scope for a new public/political life? Ashapurna narrates through ‘her story’ (although, not a very detailed life story), that the double standards showed a remarkable capacity for survival, for adjustment and reinterpretation and ‘that the value-system and humanity has remained the same over the years’ (Deb 1991).

Nevertheless, Ashapurna (a humble yet fiery proponent of the independence of women) forges out an identity by her quiet, secluded search for the ‘woman question’ in the form of silent resistance, which was her writing. This seeming passivity facilitates Ashapurna’s inclusion within the modern patriarchal project, without having any dilemma about solving the problematic question of women’s agency. As she admits, at the age of eighty-two, ‘Since I write about what is most familiar to me, (p.40) day-to-day experiences in middle-class homes, my readers feel that what I write about is very close to their experience, and want to read more and more’. Rather, her submission can easily be interpreted as befitting of a traditional woman who not only conforms to the cultural norms of Hindu middle-class community, but can also be cited as a ready reference for the new-generation women. Simultaneously, while attempting to read through her works, one will not fail to overlook her impressive agency as a writer, an agency that enables her to strategically emphasize and minimize certain dimensions of her subjectivity for specific political, religious, or social purposes.
For Ashapurna, there was no question of political commitment in the project blackha as ‘a matter of everyday activity’. But the sharing of charkha freely both by men and women ‘opened up possibilities for the reordering of gender relations’ (Sarkar, Tanika 1987: 2014–15). Of course, it can also be argued that in the newfound meaning of the sharing of charkha freely both by men and women, the domestic space hardly remains a neutral space and ‘that there was no power of resistance left in the women of India’. But as stated, in the process of ‘reordering’ ‘there was a mingling of male and female spaces’ (Sarkar, Tanika 1987: 2014–15). The fusing of the social space was important to overcome inside–outside dichotomy. Women of India became aware of the scope beyond the space outside the domestic. Moreover, the power of resistance is not only about opposing the powerful but also in the interplay of the eclectic relation, the negotiation, and the opposition of the powerful–powerless, and not merely the assertion of its harsh binaries. Ashapurna’s strategic move towards the ‘women’s question’ and insisting on the ‘need’ for a special kind of self sufficiency, ensures to a certain extent, in spite of its risks and prospects, the possibility of inclusion of her thinking within the Gandhian concepts of the man–woman relationship, as one can see a profound merging of individuality within the community’s (p.41) sedimented cultural practices to the extent of submission, while striking an identity of a writer in her own silent way.

The attempt so far was to show that the representation of the two domains are not altogether separate; there are overlaps and slippages between the categories, which are exemplified by an analogous spatial distribution within the world of Ashapurna’s private and public life as the author has already moulded the public within the personal account. The attempt was also to demonstrate the parallel structures of modern patriarchal modes of regulation as well as ‘democratic’ gender relations, since women’s entry in the public and new labour processes brought with them consequent changes in family and social structures. In this changed environment, where the crisis over identity becomes significant and in need of renovation, it can be suggested that while reading Ashapurna we have travelled a long period of time, from the colonial to the post-Independence, recovering at least partially the complex question of marginality.
From this reading, we can arrive at a quantitative deduction that a rigid division of worlds that leads to discriminatory relationships of power among family members and affects the macro political/social level as well, can be resisted by a strong sense of ‘solidarity—essentially between woman and woman’, as asserted by Ashapurna (1995b: 22). The dialogic nature that comes to the fore in this relationship becomes conspicuous because the power relationship of the outer world was replicated in the inner domestic space. In this regard the attempt was to ensure reading Ashapurna from both sides of the story, adapting the Victorian duo—the public and the private or the inside and the outside. Simultaneously, a cautious attempt has been made to examine the frequent interchangeability of these binaries, which otherwise might have proven detrimental in this case, while defining the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’. However, the analysis would be productive, and by far exhaustive, if we would read the seemingly new power relations against the domination–subordination relationship of the outer world as closely replicated within the inner one under the aegis of the newer patriarchy keeping an eye on the differences that arose from the links with the new socio-political conditions.

VI

The next section, ‘Silence and Its Contours’, consisting of two chapters, gives an account of Ashapurna Devi’s life against the backdrop of surging nationalism and reform in the colonial era and the continued complexities of transition and transformation in the postcolonial times. The chapters, while looking into the questions of agency, representation of women in her time, the possibilities of women’s writing, and the cultural space offered to women in the formation of national and social identities, also examine Ashapurna Devi’s early stages as an alert and curious writer, during the pre-Independence days and the way she emerges as a leading writer of modern times. The theme of domesticity is explored by revisiting Ashapurna’s public life as a writer. In this regard, the complexities of the ‘inner-outer’, ‘domestic-public’, within the possession of normative function, plays a very fundamental role. The chapters, thus, while reading Ashapurna Devi’s life story, diagnose the complex functioning within the nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengali society and within the constitution of culture. The chapters also examine Ashapurna’s contribution to the future of Indian feminism.

The section titled ‘The Voices of Indivisibility’ offers a selection of Ashapurna Devi’s essays and letters, linked by a common emphasis on a reading of gender and difference with attention to historical context and social reality. The essays included are—‘Society and the Role of Women’, ‘Present Education System and Women’s Self-sufficiency’, ‘Girls of Kolkata—Then and Now’, ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’, and ‘Women in the Service of Humanity’. These essays suggest the new possibility of individuality beyond the conventional self/other, inner/outer dichotomy, breaking down old boundaries and constructing new identities, keeping the tradition intact.
My introduction that precedes the translated essays offers an analysis of the unrevealed critical capacity of Ashapurna (that the essays have proven) to analyse and capture the politics of the ongoing everyday subordination of women—the subordination that is related to other social formations as well. Examining the links between the dominant colonial attitudes towards women as dependent upon their husband’s agency and the postcolonial assertions to reverse the idea of the ‘dependent subject’, it attempts to interrogate the options that Ashapurna tried to offer as practical solutions to day-to-day problems in our post times.41

The selected essays which remained ignored for far too long (perhaps due to lack of circulation) are certainly a unique interpretation of culture in the light of later feminist and post-feminist thought.42 They reveal not simply the complexities that affect a woman’s life in our post postcolonial present, they also expose and intersect the ‘contradictions’, ‘limitations’ of the complexities which are still so much fraught with contentions in the twenty-first century and can affect the future. For example, what would be the probable solution to the continuing problems that a working woman faces while trying to balance her household as well as her work front. These are not theoretical assumptions informed merely by ‘critical resources’; the observations put forward by Ashapurna are combined expressions of her lived experience as much as the critical awareness she continually developed from travelling (at a later age) and from her daily reading habits. Perhaps it will not be out of place to add an early comment from Rabindranath Tagore. In a reply to Ashapurna’s letter he declared: ‘Ashapurna tumi shampurna’ (Ashapurna you are complete) (Chatterjee, Partha 1988). (p.44) Indeed, that appellation gave her a very powerful certification of the visionary, but Ashapurna did not reply to Tagore thereafter. Ashapurna saw life as an action and it is vital to see Ashapurna’s feminist insights through the prism of her actions. She was a responsible homemaker; she was also a committed and successful writer. In the later part of her life she almost lived a life of a career woman, giving lectures at public meetings, travelling outside Bengal to keep up with her professional commitments as a writer, and also earned from her publications. She also met men and women, listened to their different problems, and tried to suggest positive directions as far as possible.
The essays along with the letters\textsuperscript{43} are indicative of Ashapurna’s comprehensive attitude towards life. The comprehensiveness that allows growing through continuous encompassment of new values, and, in one important sense, means rejecting the system of gender asymmetry, which for her served goals of hierarchy and violence. Ashapurna did not separate life from her literary activism. She tried to maintain her active and holistic approach towards life till her last days and proclaimed: ‘I write what I see’. This strategic assertion of Ashapurna offers a unique and a significantly broader base to her thoughts on Indian feminism, leaving adequate scope to the readers to think about her feminist insights beyond the ownership of ideas on equality, right, and justice. The essays exemplify that literary feminism or creative feminism for Ashapurna was a voyage towards discovery of the self, of other humans, and of the universe. For Ashapurna, the past would never be erased from memory; yet ‘Life’ should move on without a pause adapting to the need of the ‘changing Times’. Without celebrating a false sense of liberation from patriarchal domination, Ashapurna has certainly expanded the meaning of feminism in India and hopes for our post postcolonial future in their varied nuances, by maintaining difference from exclusiveness and deference for a culture that transcends the boundary of the local.

(p.45) The section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ includes some important and informative interviews of Ashapurna Devi. The idea to compile the interviews was to read the experiences of her life from the varied direct communications with luminaries and readers. Direct communications, I believe, produce better reflection of the self without any inhibition to ‘please others’. The language that evolves from conversation or direct speech brings forth meaningful yet uninterrupted reality at an organic level. It is only then that the barrier between the self and the other becomes intense and the truth gets revealed. Ashapurna conveyed this to Ranavir Rangra, when she was asked why she did not write her autobiography (discussed in ‘Silence and Its Contours’ in this volume). The observations that Ashapurna Devi posited in the interviews are crucial as her candid responses. Unpretentious of her emotions or the prescriptive social regulations, Ashapurna brought to life the culture of the time she inhabited. When asked, ‘When do you write?’ she replied,

Always; may be always, or may be never—Do the Indian middleclass housewives after fulfilling their duties of attending to home, husband and children have time for themselves? Do they even get that little time to do their hair; that they will have spare time to read a book or even leaf through the pages of a magazine? Writing is after all a devotion which is not easy to resume in short intervals; in order to be successful in this venture one needs the blessings of the Goddess of learning and to be aided by a proper environment. Can we deny the fact that even Rabindranath often took away prolonged time from his regular work schedule?

(Chatterjee, Partha 1988)
While the bold declaration of the restrictions even as a writer makes us all the more curious, we get a clear picture directly from Ashapurna as to how she has efficiently worked out the diabolically ambivalent relation between women’s creativity and compulsory domesticity in her life. The conversation(s) also demonstrate how the silenced domestic zone has made its way into the first half of the twentieth century despite the contradictions of the new social order. The much-formalized idea of the gendered division of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ finds an elaborate space in these interviews. They bring to the fore directly from the author’s mouth the culture of her day—the complexities of transition from tradition to modernity, which suggests significant transactions and registers the stirrings of a new social order.

The Annexures consist of: (i) ‘A Brief Chronological Biography’, (ii) ‘From Ashapurna’s Diary’ (which brings to light a very interesting facet of her activities—her daily accounting), and (iii) ‘List of Translated Works of Ashapurna Devi into English’ with the available publication data. These resource materials would help the future researchers to pursue with their scholarships and stay one step ahead. Those who are generally interested in reading women’s writings will find them fascinating. This book attempts to address the idea that feminism does not necessarily generate exclusivity, and a tendency towards separatism. Ashapurna Devi invites rethinking of Indian feminism as much as its praxis (customary practice), which is not the simple rejection of patriarchal culture as a solution to the women’s question. Ashapurna’s feminism provides valuable insights into the nature of the complex formation of certain aspects of ‘social reality’ of Bengal (India), involving both men and women as it cuts across geographic and temporal borders and suggests links between literatures, life, and society. Her feminism also establishes the need to have a respectful accommodation of differences of gender relations as well as of culture and location for example, as much as possible. The comprehensive outlook towards life is relevant today to meet contemporary challenges in the twenty-first century world scenario and continued fragmented relationships in our post postcolonial times.

Notes

(1.) ‘Indian Women: Myth and Reality’ by Ashapurna Devi is a translation of the inaugural address delivered by her at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, on 9 March 1989. It has been translated into English by Chandreyee Niyogi.
(2.) For example, Bengali readers may refer to Ashapurna’s Presidential Address at the Banga Sahitya Sammelan in Siliguri, in April 1972 (see Devi 1997: 142–8). There are also clear indications in this lecture that Ashapurna, much like Rabindranath Tagore, is focusing on the concept of ‘unity’ inherent in literature—the unbroken consciousness of literature which permeates the currents of thought all over the world and pulsates with the entire world’s visions and beliefs, and also an inseparable tie between society and literature (the connection between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’).

(3.) For a more comprehensive study on the power structures that define and circumscribe the lives of Third World women, see Mohanty’s influential essays, especially ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ and ‘Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism’ (2003: 17–42, 43–84).

(4.) It is interesting to note here Dagmar Engels’s observations that the ‘purdah [antahpur] system ... was more common in the west’ and that the Bengali brides and widows ‘were allowed to move around more freely than in the west’ (Engels 1996: 57–8).

(5.) See ‘Hope of Bengali Literature: Ashapurna Devi’, in this volume.

(6.) This has been discussed later.

(7.) For diatribes on the civilizing mission, see Leela Gandhi’s comprehensive study (1998: 81–101). For further references, see Borthwick (1984), esp. p. 73.

(8.) See ‘The Voices of Invisibility’ in this volume.

(9.) The author owes to P.K. Datta for the idea.

(10.) Pratham Pratisruti has been translated from Bengali as The First Promise (1995) by Indira Chowdhury. For quotations from this novel I have used Chowdhury’s translation.


(12.) Tharu and Lalita have explained the ‘hidden agendas, whose effects were by no means restricted to upper caste or middle-class women ... that the more radical and subversive women ... of the period addresses’ (1993: 152).


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(15.) For an understanding of the controversies surrounding the Western feminist intervention into the ‘native woman question’ and assessment of Indians as unfit for self-rule, see Mayo (1927), which was deeply criticized with furious rejoinders to her allegations. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore calmly dismissed the book as another tired apology for the ‘colonial civilizing mission’. This can be marked as a sane departure from the troubling aspects of the nationalist possessiveness about ‘native women’. Many traumatized critics, on the other hand, in their anti-feminist vitriol, invoked cultural authenticity to argue that the emancipation of Indian women must be couched in an indigenous idiom. Mayo’s furious invectives against the brutishness of Indian men, the horrors of child marriage, the abject condition of Indian women as a whole, and the widows in particular, are confronted as ‘flawed’, because they invite Indian women to become poor copies of their Western counterparts. (For further study, see ‘Postcolonialism and Feminism’ by Leela Gandhi.) Also see Chatterjee (1993: 117–18). [All citations are from The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (1993: 117–18).]

(16.) The poem was published in Shisusathi (a children’s magazine) in 1922. Now the poem is available in Devi (2013), p. 11.

(17.) I have used the term ‘difference’ here as developed by Partha Chatterjee in his essay ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ in Sangari and Vaid (1989), and reiterated in ‘The Nation and Its Women’ in Chatterjee (1993).

(18.) For Subarnalata, all page references are from Gopa Mazumdar’s translation of the work.

(19.) For excerpts from Bakulkatha, the translations are mine.


(21.) The entire issue of mutual exclusivity is highly complex and variable and necessarily eludes any singular monolithic understanding. For a comparative study between colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism—albeit internally contradictory, that is one being of assent and the other being that of dissent—see the two contemporary approaches to historiography by Partha Chatterjee (1986) and Sumit Sarkar (1997), respectively.

(22.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume.

(23.) This has been discussed in the section titled ‘Silence and Its Contours’ in this volume.

(24.) Ashapurna returns to the same theme of man–woman relationships and the collective effort both men and women undertook for the progress of society, in her last novel The Story of an Antahpur of Old Kolkata.

(25.) Also see Ashapurna’s preface to Pratham Pratisruti.
(26.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume for Deb’s interview of Ashapurna Devi.

(27.) For a study regarding debates on the challenging perspectives of a comprehensive historiography, which ‘may be feminist without being, exclusively, women’s history’, see the Introduction to Sangari and Vaid (1989: 2–3). Also see Radhakrishnan (2001: 190–208).


(29.) This has been mentioned in Chatterjee, Partha (1989) and reiterated in Chatterjee, Partha (1993).

(30.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume.


(32.) Also discussed in the section titled ‘The Voices of Invisibility’ in this volume.

(33.) Gandhiji used and ‘gave currency to all three’, he added. I select this part of the inaugural speech of the ex-governor of West Bengal at Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Kolkata, delivered on 1 May, 2007, because Gandhiji’s confident and yet non-violent movement against British imperialism had a substantial influence on Ashapurna.

(34.) The idea is not to project Gandhiji as the precursor of women’s movement in India; what needs to be emphasized is that ‘women assumed a centrality within the nationalist enterprise’ through their special role at the charkha. See Sarkar, Tanika (1987: 2013).

(35.) See the Plate Section for the photograph of Ashapurna spinning the charkha. The photograph was taken at her maternal uncle’s house.

(36.) Also see Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXVII, p. 308.

(37.) Also see Mazumdar (1976: 58).

(38.) To grasp Gandhi’s positive intension towards making women conscious of their power, both physical and intellectual, and for a fuller study relevant to ‘consciousness is power’ which creates a new understanding and makes possible of a new effect in turn’, see Fetterley (1991: 499).

(39.) See ‘My Thoughts on Literature’ (1978: 20).

(40.) Interview with Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty on 6 March 1991, published in Newsletter, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Decadal Number, 24 March 2000.
Post times here indicate postcolonial as well as post postcolonial times, which would mean the interconnections between transition and transformation at least twenty five years after Independence. For example, we may refer to the complexities of the legislation of the ‘divorce act’ in the essay ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’ included in this volume.

For understanding the relevance of the complexities of a comparative study on Ashapurna’s thoughts on Indian feminism vis-à-vis an account of Euro-American feminisms prevalent during her time, see Gamble (2001).

Ashapurna Devi’s essays and letters included in the section titled ‘The Silences of Invisibility’ have been translated by the author of the present volume.

Additional reference may be made to Enakshi Chattyopadhyay’s “The Outside World Comes Willingly to “Her”’. When asked about how she found time to write, Ashapurna Devi replied, ‘I had to sit up late. To me the family chores always came first. My family came before my writing. Nobody should feel neglected—that was foremost in my mind.’ It was the full-time occupation of a housewife, surrounded by in laws, absorbed by the Puja rituals and intricacies of cooking. ‘You must not do anything which would make others talk’—that was what my husband used to say. He also wanted me to behave that way’. Naturally, Ashapurna was always pressed for time, as a housewife fulfilling the demands of the family and the extended family, as she says in her own words, ‘the roles and obligation and biases inherent in them’. Gradually, we see that the publishers’ and reader’s demands on her time overshot her huge household responsibility, which by the virtue of juxtaposition appeared to give her the only way out of the ‘caged freedom’. This became possible because ever since she came to her husband’s home at the age of fifteen, there used to dwell another Ashapurna inside her. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘this other self forced me to write. Even when rigorously busy in the kitchen, my other self would be constantly at work ....’ It must be noted that Ashapurna Devi had to struggle through decades of intractable conflicts of ‘denial’ and ‘acceptance’, ‘oppression’ and ‘expropriation’ to the extent of being stamped in the public front as a ‘kitchen writer’. Yet, she succeeds in finding her ‘self-worth and identity’ (Chatterjee 1993: 117), breaking the barriers between the mind and the body, the home and the world, the private and the public through the sheer commitment to her ‘self’. Indeed, Ashapurna Devi successfully steers her ‘feminine creative voyage’ as a positive interventionist into the many threads and different patterns in the rough weave of the gendered sensibility and discourse, securing an undisputed position for herself as one of the pioneers of ‘the twentieth century Indian women’s writings of the social culture of Bengal’ (Dasgupta 2002: Introduction). By 1995, when Ashapurna breathed her last on 13 July, she left behind a treasure of 240 novels, over 2,000 stories, and 62 books for children along with many other unpublished essays and letters.


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(12.) Tharu and Lalita have explained the ‘hidden agendas, whose effects were by no means restricted to upper caste or middle-class women ... that the more radical and subversive women ... of the period addresses’ (1993: 152).


(14.) The essay, 'Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination', was previously published in Daedalus, Vol. 126, No. 2, Human Diversity (Spring 1997), pp. 1–26.
(15.) For an understanding of the controversies surrounding the Western feminist intervention into the ‘native woman question’ and assessment of Indians as unfit for self-rule, see Mayo (1927), which was deeply criticized with furious rejoinders to her allegations. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore calmly dismissed the book as another tired apology for the ‘colonial civilizing mission’. This can be marked as a sane departure from the troubling aspects of the nationalist possessiveness about ‘native women’. Many traumatized critics, on the other hand, in their anti-feminist vitriol, invoked cultural authenticity to argue that the emancipation of Indian women must be couched in an indigenous idiom. Mayo’s furious invectives against the brutishness of Indian men, the horrors of child marriage, the abject condition of Indian women as a whole, and the widows in particular, are confronted as ‘flawed’, because they invite Indian women to become poor copies of their Western counterparts. (For further study, see ‘Postcolonialism and Feminism’ by Leela Gandhi.) Also see Chatterjee (1993: 117–18). [All citations are from The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (1993: 117–18).]

(16.) The poem was published in Shisusathi (a children’s magazine) in 1922. Now the poem is available in Devi (2013), p. 11.

(17.) I have used the term ‘difference’ here as developed by Partha Chatterjee in his essay ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ in Sangari and Vaid (1989), and reiterated in ‘The Nation and Its Women’ in Chatterjee (1993).

(18.) For Subarnalata, all page references are from Gopa Mazumdar’s translation of the work.

(19.) For excerpts from Bakulkatha, the translations are mine.


(21.) The entire issue of mutual exclusivity is highly complex and variable and necessarily eludes any singular monolithic understanding. For a comparative study between colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism—albeit internally contradictory, that is one being of assent and the other being that of dissent—see the two contemporary approaches to historiography by Partha Chatterjee (1986) and Sumit Sarkar (1997), respectively.

(22.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume.

(23.) This has been discussed in the section titled ‘Silence and Its Contours’ in this volume.

(24.) Ashapurna returns to the same theme of man–woman relationships and the collective effort both men and women undertook for the progress of society, in her last novel The Story of an Antahpur of Old Kolkata.

(25.) Also see Ashapurna’s preface to Pratham Pratisruti.
(26.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume for Deb’s interview of Ashapurna Devi.

(27.) For a study regarding debates on the challenging perspectives of a comprehensive historiography, which ‘may be feminist without being, exclusively, women’s history’, see the Introduction to Sangari and Vaid (1989: 2-3). Also see Radhakrishnan (2001: 190–208).


(29.) This has been mentioned in Chatterjee, Partha (1989) and reiterated in Chatterjee, Partha (1993).

(30.) See the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume.


(32.) Also discussed in the section titled ‘The Voices of Invisibility’ in this volume.

(33.) Gandhiji used and ‘gave currency to all three’, he added. I select this part of the inaugural speech of the ex-governor of West Bengal at Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Kolkata, delivered on 1 May, 2007, because Gandhiji’s confident and yet non-violent movement against British imperialism had a substantial influence on Ashapurna.

(34.) The idea is not to project Gandhiji as the precursor of women’s movement in India; what needs to be emphasized is that ‘women assumed a centrality within the nationalist enterprise’ through their special role at the charkha. See Sarkar, Tanika (1987: 2013).

(35.) See the Plate Section for the photograph of Ashapurna spinning the charkha. The photograph was taken at her maternal uncle’s house.

(36.) Also see Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXVII, p. 308.

(37.) Also see Mazumdar (1976: 58).

(38.) To grasp Gandhi’s positive intension towards making women conscious of their power, both physical and intellectual, and for a fuller study relevant to ‘consciousness is power’ which creates a new understanding and makes possible of a new effect in turn’, see Fetterley (1991: 499).

(39.) See ‘My Thoughts on Literature’ (1978: 20).

(40.) Interview with Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty on 6 March 1991, published in Newsletter, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Decadal Number, 24 March 2000.
(41.) Post times here indicate postcolonial as well as post postcolonial times, which would mean the interconnections between transition and transformation at least twenty five years after Independence. For example, we may refer to the complexities of the legislation of the ‘divorce act’ in the essay ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’ included in this volume.

(42.) For understanding the relevance of the complexities of a comparative study on Ashapurna’s thoughts on Indian feminism vis-à-vis an account of Euro-American feminisms prevalent during her time, see Gamble (2001).

(43.) Ashapurna Devi’s essays and letters included in the section titled ‘The Silences of Invisibility’ have been translated by the author of the present volume.

(44.) Additional reference may be made to Enakshi Chattyopadhyay’s “The Outside World Comes Willingly to “Her”’. When asked about how she found time to write, Ashapurna Devi replied, ‘I had to sit up late. To me the family chores always came first. My family came before my writing. Nobody should feel neglected—that was foremost in my mind.’ It was the full-time occupation of a housewife, surrounded by in laws, absorbed by the Puja rituals and intricacies of cooking. ‘You must not do anything which would make others talk’—that was what my husband used to say. He also wanted me to behave that way’. Naturally, Ashapurna was always pressed for time, as a housewife fulfilling the demands of the family and the extended family, as she says in her own words, ‘the roles and obligation and biases inherent in them’. Gradually, we see that the publishers’ and reader’s demands on her time overshot her huge household responsibility, which by the virtue of juxtaposition appeared to give her the only way out of the ‘caged freedom’. This became possible because ever since she came to her husband’s home at the age of fifteen, there used to dwell another Ashapurna inside her. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘this other self forced me to write. Even when rigorously busy in the kitchen, my other self would be constantly at work ....’ It must be noted that Ashapurna Devi had to struggle through decades of intractable conflicts of ‘denial’ and ‘acceptance’, ‘oppression’ and ‘expropriation’ to the extent of being stamped in the public front as a ‘kitchen writer’. Yet, she succeeds in finding her ‘self-worth and identity’ (Chatterjee 1993: 117), breaking the barriers between the mind and the body, the home and the world, the private and the public through the sheer commitment to her ‘self’. Indeed, Ashapurna Devi successfully steers her ‘feminine creative voyage’ as a positive interventionist into the many threads and different patterns in the rough weave of the gendered sensibility and discourse, securing an undisputed position for herself as one of the pioneers of ‘the twentieth century Indian women’s writings of the social culture of Bengal’ (Dasgupta 2002: Introduction). By 1995, when Ashapurna breathed her last on 13 July, she left behind a treasure of 240 novels, over 2,000 stories, and 62 books for children along with many other unpublished essays and letters.


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