Silence and Its Contours

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Abstract and Keywords

The first part of this chapter, primarily reading the forms of presence and absence of silence in Ashapurna Devi’s life, exposes the ‘contrary-tensions’ between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and their link to Ashapurna’s preoccupation with the restrictive social environment. While reading closely the feeling of Ashapurna’s mixed experience as obtained from her autobiographical reminiscences, it diagnoses the hidden edifice of complex ideologies that functioned within the early twentieth-century Bengali society and within the constitution of culture. The second part, while reflecting on the complexities of the colonial times, analyses the link between Ashapurna’s sensitive assertions to combat coercive forces that marginalize women, and her distinct perceptions about the need to question multifarious hegemony at play in society. Within this dynamic perspective of Ashapurna to attend the women’s question, the chapter, while remaining focused on an interlacing conflict between societies and cultures, examines the indigeneity of Indian feminism which is said to have helped and was helped by the new nationalist patriarchy, to overcome ‘the colonial situation’.

Keywords: human relation, marriage, mother, education, transition, nation and social life, anticolonialism, autobiography, Indian feminism, hegemony, new patriarchy, social culture, women’s question

We ... brothers and sisters ... lived a very simple life. My elder brothers were literate [they went to school] but, for us, after twelve years of age, we were strictly bound by rigorous codes of discipline, within the four walls of our house. While I try to recall the times of yore, I feel if I were a daughter of a poor man or if I were a daughter of some distinguished and wealthy person, even then I would have had something to talk about .... It was just a middle class affair; a plain, middle class outlook. Only that my father was an artist and that my mother was an ardent lover of literature. It could be for that reason we had some sort of a different mindset that separated us from the rest of our relations.

(Ashapurna Devi 1992c: 14)

Ashapurna Devi was born on 8 January 1909 to a conventional middle-class Bengali family (Gupta-bari) at her maternal uncle’s house in Pataldanga Street, North Calcutta. The principal family seat of the Gupta-bari (Gupta household) was at Brindaban (p.62) Basu Lane in North Calcutta. Ashapurna Devi (Gupta) lived the first five years of her childhood days here with her parents, brothers, and sisters (that included her cousins in an extended joint family) under the strict supervision of her grandmother. That was the usual way the joint family operated.

It must have been fun for any child to find so many playmates in one’s own house. Ashapurna gives us a feeling of her mixed experience in whatever little autobiographical reminiscences she has left for us. She did not find interest in playing with dolls, which her playmates indulged in. She was tomboyish and loved spending time with books. That was the only way for Saralasundari Gupta (1877–1934), Ashapurna’s mother, to keep the ‘naughty’ and, at times, ‘unmanageable’ Ashapurna quiet. Occupied in household chores in a huge joint family, it was a sort of relief for Saralasundari to make her sit on a wide window sill with books to keep her company. Saralasundari herself was a compulsive reader and indulged her daughters with books, and that opened a different world for them.
At the first instance any reader will not fail to grasp that life was an easy-going one for little Ashapurna. But as she writes in several places, under her grandmother’s watchful eye, no girl child of Gupta-bari could go to school. Leave alone schooling, approval for being tutored at home was only a male child’s prerogative. Tutors came home only to teach the boys, and the girls remained as mute spectators of their brothers going to school and studying at home. For Ashapurna Devi, to defy her grandmother’s iron will was difficult but not impossible. As she said later, ‘... if the urge to achieve something burns within oneself nothing can stop from fulfilling the goal’. It was indeed a struggle for Ashapurna to balance her inner urge and the outer adventures of discovery, of the discriminatory practices. This indelible impression of discrimination on the tender mind, which we also see in George Eliot’s representation of Maggie Tulliver in her novel *Mill on the Floss*, is demonstrated sensitively by Ashapurna with great alertness to the social/familial antagonism in her writings, both fictional and non-fictional. In her brief autobiographical reminiscence, *Amar Chhelebela*, Ashapurna observes that her only objective during those days in Gupta-bari was to learn to read and write the Bengali alphabet. She learned so by sitting opposite her elder brothers at their study table while they did their school exercises, or in their absence she would take the opportunity to get hold of their books. Of course she was too small to understand the right way to hold a book. To watch her reading books upside down, Ashapurna recollects in the same essay, became a matter of amusement for the elders in the house. She took the matter sportingly and at the same time ‘endeavoured arduously’ to teach herself her own special way of learning. Gradually, Ashapurna found out ways to hold books correctly and to read them in a proper way. While narrating this process of learning to read she describes a very special moment in her life.

I can make out from an incident that [I could read] even before I was three years old. When my sister, who is three years younger than me, was born and my mother was still in the lying-in room, I used to sit outside the room and loudly read out books to my mother. Who cares to understand what it meant? Oh! She was so fond of reading, but could not even touch a book then. (Devi 1985: 32)

It is interesting to note that Ashapurna Devi picked up those moments that affected a woman’s life. Little Ashapurna could not bother to understand the meaning of the text. Her only concern was to keep her mother happy. At that tender age it was definitely not possible for her to grasp the prevalent superstition of the ‘ unholy’ act of taking a book—the symbol of the Goddess of learning—into the lying-in room, but her insight into a woman’s life is revealed sensitively. Ashapurna was intelligent and to negotiate the policing of the ‘lady in authority’ was not difficult for her. She was a sheer lover of books and no ‘iron will’ (p. 64) could suppress her choice in exercising her freedom to read and learn. Recalling her days in Gupta-bari she writes,
My Childhood?

I cannot single out anything to describe it. In North Calcutta, by the side of a very narrow lane stood a very medium sized old house, it is within the four walls of this house my childhood days are confined.

Striving hard down memory lane, I get stuck at a place where I can see a girl about three years old, in old Bengali language, patharkuchir moto meye—a girl with the firmness of a stonwort. (Devi 1985: 31)

It is quite clear from Ashapurna Devi’s self-analysis that her childhood was confined ‘within the four walls’. It is also not difficult to conjecture that she did not conform to the strictness. Rather, Ashapurna followed her mother who was a symbol of education to her. In Gupta-bari, as Ashapurna said in the same essay, there was not a single woman touched by the impulse of ‘modernity’. They did not even know to read the alphabet. Ashapurna’s mother was born in the womb of tradition, yet it is to be noticed that she was a literate lady. She was an insatiable reader: She read books, newspapers, magazines, as well as scriptural texts. For her to be without books was worse than to be without water. Thus, she spaced out time for herself from her daily chores to fulfil her passion and with full conviction, she kept up with her daily reading habit in spite of the obvious difficulties. Her knowledge told her that the common belief that a literate woman was destined to be a widow was false. Therefore, Saralasundari did not conform to the prevalent conservatisms of the time. Rather, to quench her irrepressible desire, her thirst for knowledge, to know everything that was recently published, she had later built a library for herself.

Ashapurna treasured those privileged moments in her life as she too was a bookworm. It would, of course, be wrong to (p.65) assume from the example of Saralasundari–Ashapurna (mother–daughter) relationship that most of the women in Bengali society embraced an enlightened outlook. Nevertheless, there were a few women, like Ashapurna’s mother, in the colonial phase who preserved a distinctly Indian female identity that also challenged the orthodox models of womanhood in Bengal. In this regard, she can be cited as a ready reference to an early-generation ‘new woman’. Saralasundari was an Indian at the core of her heart. As far as her dress, attitude towards life, maintaining rites and rituals was concerned, she was distinctly a Bengali. One can easily say that she was a little possessive about Indian culture and tradition. But she did not submit to the orthodoxy that withheld the country from progress, neither did she opt for an easy alternative that came with colonial modernity.
As far as Ashapurna’s life was concerned, changes started to take place when her father, Harendranath Gupta (1866–1944), moved to a house with his family at 166, Upper Circular Road. This house was given to him as a company accommodation by the C. Lazarus Company where Harendranath Gupta, a commercial artist by profession, was an in-house designer. Ashapurna came to this house when she was about six years old. Here, in a hassle-free atmosphere, Ashapurna with her mother and sisters enjoyed reading to their heart’s content. It is in this house that Saralasundari had built the library. The collection of books provided Ashapurna and her sisters with reading material, enabling them to continue to read ceaselessly, when most of the girls of her age were deprived of this opportunity. Not only that, a steady platform was also built, from where Ashapurna would go on to start her career as a writer. Yet, Ashapurna comments, ‘My father had innumerable hobbies that were becoming difficult for him to pursue. Or else why would he agree to shift?’ (1985: 34).

Ashapurna gives a clear picture of her perceptions about her parents and especially her father’s willingness to shift to the company accommodation which was not only to honour his wife’s demand, but also to fulfil his desired ways of living that was difficult in the restrictive domestic environment of the Brindaban Basu Lane house. She further mentions that it was difficult to keep up with his hobbies primarily because of space constraint in the earlier house. The new house was big, with less family members. Harendranath Gupta bought an ‘organ’ for himself and started to take tuitions for the same from Matukbabu of Star Theatre. He also had space for himself that an artist needed. Harendranath was a man with a liberal outlook, but what shocked little Ashapurna was his lack of love for books. Observing the difference between her parents, Ashapurna Devi writes:

We grew up in an atmosphere of two contending waves. The two heads of the family, one belonged to the North pole, the other to the South pole .... My mother’s only object in life was literature. For my father, everything was fine other than literature. He had innumerable hobbies .... Moreover, he was an artist. He also carved many beautiful wooden sculptures. (1985: 35)

It is hard to believe that a man with amazing skills in painting and sculpting could be loath towards literary pursuits. Nevertheless, arrangements were made to procure books from different libraries. Books came from Jyanprakash library, Sri Chaitanya library, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (library). Ashapurna makes a special mention about the last one as all the bounded volumes of old magazines and papers were not found elsewhere. That included the first volumes of Prabasi, Bharati, Pradip, Mukul, Sakha O Sathi, and many others. Other than the collections that came from the library, Saralasundari’s library had innumerable volumes that included collected works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, among others, and even the Mahabharata.
A close reading of the autobiographical essays reveal to a reader of the twenty-first century certain uncertainty of ideas (p.67) regarding the women’s question: Ashapurna’s interrogation of women’s place in society, her anxiety about the entire arena of desirable home and conjugal life in colonial Bengal, and her continuous doubts regarding love and prescriptions. Moreover, the problematics of domestic relations are constantly juxtaposed to her psychological move away from certain prescriptive assertions ingrained in the social system, which are so infectious to the place of convention, that she cannot escape constant reference to those. In fact, instead of reducing the ‘pain’ and ‘triumph’ of the whole process to another form of male patriarchal manipulation, what is unique of Ashapurna’s feminist consciousness is the nature of exploration of what social conjunctures gave focus and direction to certain kinds of diffused experiences of deprivation among women themselves. These terminologies are both unsettling and disturbing in the way they displace a gesture, and become symptomatic of social ruptures and shifts in power. What is it about the family that makes it so difficult to be seen as a space of power and control? In Ashapurna Devi’s words:

[...] my world is totally enclosed within four walls. [That space of power and control is exclusively guarded.] Yet, within those limits I see so much of variety in human life. What a vast assortment of characters! A man who has the urge to ascend, who is honest and graceful, with all good intentions, may have to amend himself under compelling circumstances .... It is true not only with regard to man–woman relationships, it holds true for all other familial relationships where the warp and woof of domestic life is sutured with the antithetical assumptions of aesthetic and political. (1992c: 13)
It is quite clear from this comprehensive and perceptive observation of Ashapurna that her thoughts about feminism are not only profoundly Indian but are also deeply charged with a humanist philosophy of life. She could not forget those days when colonial Bengal was ravaged by repeated epidemics, famine, and their untold consequences on human life, especially on women who remained neglected because they themselves, in many cases, were not conscious about their own basic needs for education and health care. Of course child marriage was at the root of many problems which otherwise could have been avoided. Her protest was not against men as such, but against the system of marginalization. Ashapurna felt that men will have to raise their consciousness, but women too have to get the benefits of modernity. For instance, she said in Pratham Pratisruti that mothers should not ‘dedicate events to the hands of fate’ (Devi in 2004: 526). Such nuanced understanding of human life and her particular attention to the ‘basic issues’ in a woman’s life, like ‘education’, ‘marriage’, ‘equality of sexes’ remained neglected in various critiques on Ashapurna, until Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Jasodhara Bagchi, and Indira Chowdhury in the late 1990s gave some directions to assess her feminist texts. Ashapurna’s preoccupation with women’s life was certainly not mere kitchen sink stories. The woman’s voices of protest that she wished to highlight in her works are original explorations and expositions of the antahpur from where women revolted against the ignominy they suffered.

II

In order to comprehend Ashapurna’s work, it is essential to engage with her life and the way she directed it towards a feminist cause. Moreover, there is a need to understand the colonial context and the complications that arose of the material and ideological changes which affected women. One can always attempt broader comparisons based on many ‘feminisms’ of the world because the basic aspects of a woman’s life and the deprivations she encounters are more or less the same. But a gap would always remain in the study if we underestimate the tenacious hold of the particular complicated historical context. This part of the book makes a modest attempt to read Ashapurna’s life as she depicts herself. It needs to be mentioned here that the clash of values and contradicting aims will prevail in any society whose postcolonial present is determined by the ‘historical past’, but sustaining through constraints and ambiguities was central to Ashapurna’s thinking.

Without grudging her fate, without putting blame upon anybody, Ashapurna negotiated with all disparate situations of her life. One can also say that she understood her non-formal education from an optimistic point of view. She saw that as an advantage over coercive forces to read countless books (only fiction and novels and no geography, no history, no mathematics6) to her heart’s content and to write steadily, which she believed would not have been possible if she was allowed the exposure that her brothers were granted.
True, reading and writing provided Ashapurna an ‘open sesame’ to the world outside, which separated her from the girls of her time. Apart from this, it was difficult to evade the sanctioned roles rooted in the family ideology which amounted to conformation of rules. The middle class construct of the girl child as *khukurani* (Bagchi 1993: 2214–19) meant that she must be both liberated as a child and committed to the domestic virtues for which her life is a long preparation—for she will have to take these on as a *bhadramahila* (Bagchi 1993: 2218). This can be taken as a clue to the process of socialization, which Ashapurna had to undergo. She and her sisters could not go to school. Was it because of the fear of early widowhood which was a frequently involved threat? Or, was it because formal education was thought to encourage women in becoming immodest, undisciplined, and uncontrollable? The basic fear as Jasodhara Bagchi observed was of girls losing their submissiveness through education (Bagchi 1993: 217). Ashapurna Devi does not indicate any other reaction to the ‘complex dimension of reality’ than discussed above as far as her own life is concerned. But the pain of segregation and seclusion had a deep-seated impression on (p.70) Ashapurna. She shares this personal experience while conversing with Bhabani Mukherjee:

To call it a ‘cultured atmosphere’, would be an expression which sounds quite timid .... But the combination of my father’s penchant for fine art and my mother’s love for literature perhaps created an atmosphere that was possibly different from the common middle class family environment, but the *purdah* was definitely very rigid. I was almost encaged behind the iron bars from the age of twelve.  

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8
Ashapurna’s observation of herself as a caged bird even after the publication of her magnum opus *Pratham Pratisruti* not only depicts the pain of a young woman’s confinement to domesticity in the early twentieth century, but also the tension and the capacity of the creative mind to direct the urge of feminist activism into her writing. That was her silent resistance. Thus, the inner journey and the outer manifestation in the form of writing, needs to be understood as a struggle which Ashapurna explained herself. ‘There was always a lingering protest preserved secretly within me against the opinionated world. The disapproval of the discriminatory practices may be described as a craving for women’s liberation or sexual freedom [although the term was not used during her time as she says]’. Her endeavour as a feminist was directed towards the upliftment of society as a whole and had not much to do with her ‘personal’ situations: ‘The concern was for the society at large’ (Devi 1992b: 17). In this context, one can read Ashapurna as a compassionate feminist. Ashapurna did not see men as enemy to women but as a compatriot in need of rise of consciousness. However, it must be mentioned, in order to understand her feminist insight, the first step should be to analyse her life keeping in mind the historical context of transition—the changing social structure as an effect of the continuities and discontinuities of tradition and the trappings of modernity. Asked to define the legitimate space of girls/women in the new society that they deserve, Ashapurna observed:

*(p.71)* The discrepancy had caused a lot of agony in me. I witnessed the endless sufferings of women in my childhood—the disadvantage of being a woman; and the conflicts that I suffered within my mind intrigued me all the time. Other than that, there was a suppressed pain against conservatism. We three sisters were deprived even of minimum [formal] education. This pain accumulated day after day in my mind and had its outlet in every fold of my writings.⁹
Although seemingly repetitive, it is worthwhile to notice that Ashapurna’s personal experience of the past (her childhood during the colonial times) had such a persistent hold in her mind that it left constant references in her writings. Yet, her feminist stance was directed towards future. ‘A thousand of Subarnas must live’ (Devi 1964: 481). No country can consider itself free if half of its mass dozes in illiteracy. Therefore, Subarnalata/Subarna will not simply devote herself to doing pujas, observing fasts, worshipping her husband as her lord, her master, her god. In the novel Subarnalata, Subarna boldly refuses to do the puja planned by her husband on her behalf because she was constantly keeping ill. When Prabodh (Subarna’s husband) reminded her that the priest, who had come to do the puja, was treated with respect everywhere, Subarna’s cool remark was, ‘I have a lot of respect for him, too. That is why I could not tell him a lie’ (Mazumdar 1997: 156). Subarna would rather worship Ambika the anti-colonial nationalist who did a lot of social work for the country and for the uplift of girls/women. Ambika is a fictional character, but Ashapurna in her lifetime had familiarity with Rabindranath Tagore’s and Mahatma Gandhi’s (none of them were extremist) contribution to the anti-colonial struggle and their definite concern for women’s upliftment. Although at times they differed in their personal views, their specific contribution to the anti-colonial struggle (in India) or to save the country from the indignity of the colonial status cannot be undermined. Rabindranath said,

(p.72) Politics is not a mere abstraction, it has its personality and it does intrude into my life where I am human. It kills and maims individuals, it tells lies, it uses its sacred sword of justice for the purpose of massacre, it spreads misery broadcast over centuries of exploitation and I cannot say to myself, ‘Poet you have nothing to do with these facts, for they belong to politics’.

In similar ways it can be said that Ashapurna directed her anti-colonial thoughts towards the future. Ashapurna was never involved in politics as such but her perception about this phase of anti-colonial struggle and its ‘moral and intellectual’ trajectory to broader connections and concerns was deep. In fact, it was the inexhaustible richness of the collection of literature that had brought the world to her home and vice versa.

Moreover, apart from the luminaries, general people, both men and women, those who were alert, fought for the larger struggle in whatever little ways possible. But, we must ask, who inspired little Ashapurna? It was definitely her mother, whom she constantly referred to as ‘nationalist’ minded.

III
As Ashapurna recalled the days of yore, she saw that the speculative forces which emerged from the mixed ethics of traditionalism and the West-influenced modernism made its way towards the making of the girl child. It had its positive as well as negative effect. Ashapurna, as we have discussed, was born to a middle class, conservative family in Calcutta. It was natural that she had to conform to certain codes of socialization which were ‘devised’ for the girl child. Ashapurna also experienced how the Western modality for bringing up children had made its way to the private day-to-day life as she was being raised.

In her essay ‘Christmas Among Our Childhood Festivities’, Ashapurna describes how her mother, Saralasundari, took interest in making colourful streamers to hang all around the (p.73) house with small lamps in between. These lamps were covered with perforated empty cigarette tins of Harendranath Gupta, which were preserved all through the year. Children, irrespective of sex, were free to enjoy the festival. They went out to the ‘shahib para’ (non-Indian locality) to see the festival of lights with relatives who came from outside Kolkata to stay with them, but in a covered horse carriage. She also mentions that as there was no electric light in their house, they awaited those days to have the joy rides and enjoyed the display of lights peeking from their carriage windows.

The festival was followed by an elaborate distribution of food and warm bed linens among the people who worked for them, without any bias for sex or caste. From the Brahmin cook to the domestic help from a different caste, who washed utensils, all received equal attention in this regard. Hospitality was at the core of Saralasundari’s education. Just as in other festivals like Diwali, Kalipuja, Nabanna (the festival of eating newly grown autumnal rice), etc., Christmas was all about food and fun. Ashapurna nurtured the open-ended outlook of her mother all through her life, which was free of class, caste, gender, and religious bias. The thoughtful efforts that have escorted the conquest of the national identity from where it has been possible to reconstruct one’s own past history for the future, often goes unnoticed. Ashapurna’s protest was against that. Her activism mostly took the form of writing. Together with that, Ashapurna noticed the warmth of her mother and the immense care she took to look after her guests and pay substantial attention to those who were less privileged, but, she comments: ‘After all, it was my father’s most loved non-Indian festival’ (60–4). One will perhaps observe that in spite of the complexities of the time, women answered themselves to the imbalance in human relationship created by the colonial impulse and as also the new patriarchy.
Ashapurna was an alert and discerning child and she sensitively absorbed the waves of changes and continuities in the family. Some of them have been discussed above and we will take up a few more. Her observations offer valuable insight into the nature of the complex situation. According to her, the breakup of the joint family system did not lead to the extinction of middle-class values of maintaining relationships, till the early twentieth century. Patience, warmth, care, and feelings for others formed an integral part of Saralasundari, which in turn strengthened not only the individual balance but also helped in maintaining a tranquil atmosphere in her own family and outside. Moreover, Saralasundari spaced out time to read, and that was her ‘own’ time. One such instance of challenge that her mother had to put up with is narrated by Ashapurna in the same essay:

In the view of one, reading all through the day is a superfluous craze—nothing but an unnecessary exercise, a waste of time; while the reading habit and realization of one’s own interest, is the opinion of the other ....

In the view of one, to remain behind the iron curtain was the most suitable order for women; while the other opined for the awakening of Indian women, or else, all would be futile. Women’s education and women’s liberation are absolutely necessary. [The phrase ‘women’s emancipation’ was not coined then.]

If one remarked, ‘that Rabithakur of yours’ ... the other will immediately respond ‘not only ours, but of one and all’. And not Rabithakur, he is Rabindranath Thakur [read Tagore].

Leave that aside. Is it right that he has founded a school for performing arts to train girls of middle class families to sing and dance?

Of course, it is particularly worthy of appreciation. He is at least reviving [the positive/creative aspects of] those girls who otherwise would wither away forever.

But, what is the big deal if a few of the girls get some degrees. Will they go out to work in the office, or, will they become judges and magistrates? ...

Are all places in the world monopoly of men folk? Let the society educate some of the girls and see what women can do or cannot. (Devi 1983: 59)
The ‘contradictory winds’ in the family reveal that all that mattered to Saralasundari was ‘freedom of mind’ and ‘freedom of opportunity’—in the words of Amartya Sen, clearing certain ‘unfreedoms’ as far as possible. That can be applied to practical life only through education. Not education for profit, as Martha Nussbaum would put it, but education that would enable one to cross the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the murky boundary that segregates the social space into the private space for woman and the public space for men. Ashapurna internalized quite early in her life, that the relationship between the public and private domains was not to be disturbed.

Yet, in her own life, Ashapurna did not submit to the internal forces of orthodoxy that prevented women from advancement. Of course, by now we know that was partially possible because of her mother. However, the ‘self-biographical’ analysis of Ashapurna Devi also demonstrates an extraordinary capacity of a girl/woman born in the womb of tradition to contend with the deep-seated impressions of gender conflicts quite early in life. Her intelligence also enabled her to understand the privilege of having for a mother a literate lady, whose ‘pastime’ was devoted to reading books and keeping herself up to date with the contemporary news. She also questioned the misleading aspects of the ‘diverse perspectives on modernity’, and we shall discuss that in ‘Resisting Silence’.

The portions of Ashapurna’s life discussed till now suggest that she was self-taught but that she was not veiled from the outside world. It was indeed a very complicated phase and an utterly confusing time in colonial Bengal. It was very difficult for both parents and children to cope with the transition that was taking place then in colonial Bengal. Ashapurna was a keen observer of the complexities. But her constant intellectual (p.76) effort was aimed at challenging fixed opinions, especially that of marginalized women. In this mission towards women’s emancipation, Ashapurna Devi is one of the foremost women writers of twentieth-century Bengal to take bold steps as far as literary feminism is concerned in the Indian context. She established a woman’s voice as an agent of change in society in spite of all disparate situations in life.

As far as her own life was concerned, Ashapurna had always been optimistic. That could be one of the reasons why she could write that ‘Incessant reading induced in me the urge to write …. It is by the way of playing I started to write’—Khela theke lekha (Devi 1976: 3). This reading and writing became the main source of attachment between the ‘three inseparable sisters’. It was a spirit of healthy competition among the sisters, as she mentions later; that fascinated little Ashapurna to write and take a bold step to publish them and that too without the knowledge of her parents. As we read her life further, we will see that it was a constant process of growth.
Her inclination to read and to write leads to a symbolic explosion when Ashapurna sends her writing, a poem, to a children’s magazine, *Shisusathi*, in 1922. To her surprise, the poem—her first poem to be published—‘*Bairer Dak*’ (A Call from Outside) was accepted. The editor wrote a letter of congratulation encouraging young Ashapurna to contribute a few stories for the children’s literary magazine. Ashapurna agreed to his request most happily (Devi 1997: 3–4). Henceforth, as she said, her pen never stopped ‘like a car rolling down a well tarred road’ (1985: 38). She wrote relentlessly as the ‘goddess’s stenographer’, as she called herself. One can say by manipulating the ‘negativeness’ through passivity, Ashapurna emerged successful by maintaining the normative model for femininity which was also laced with her deep sense of religiosity. Of course this change came in her life much later.

Ashapurna’s career started at the age of thirteen when she was with her parents at 157/1 Upper Circular Road, in Kolkata. Two years later she received the first prize for writing a poem for a competition organized by another children’s literary magazine, *Khoka Khuku*. So we can say that her literary career had started with a bang and yet, as she says, it had to be curbed. It was time for her to get married. She was fifteen. ‘So here ended my childhood’, declared Ashapurna (Devi 1985: 39).

IV
‘After that? After that what happened?’… (39)

‘[Putting in all books I received as prize in a new iron trunk], I started my journey for my in-laws’ house in a village [Majherpara] at Krishnanagar. Drawing my sari overhead, I trundled my way through the Sealdah railway station for the destination’ (39).

The marital knot was tied between Ashapurna Devi and Kalidas Gupta on 19 July 1924. Kalidas Gupta (1902–1978) was a bank employee posted in Calcutta. For this he had to constantly move between the city and the village. It was only during the weekends that he could visit the village. Naturally, the beginning of Ashapurna’s married life could not have been very pleasant. Moreover, she grew up in Calcutta. Although she experienced Calcutta and its dynamic shades of progress and its complexities mostly ‘through the window’, for a life outside Calcutta was quite unimaginable for her. Commenting on her preference for living in Calcutta, she said in an autobiographical note, ‘I do not know if the children of today are in love with Calcutta. But we were. At least, I was. And I still am. A first love can never fade away (Devi 1966: 43).
It is not difficult to presume that Ashapurna’s first journey to a village—where everything was static, like a motionless picture of human existence—was almost like a journey to a prison. Before going any further it must be noted that Ashapurna Devi writes almost nothing about her life as a new bride in Majherpara village. Her familiarity with the atmosphere (p.78) of Calcutta always left her with an impression of being dumped in the village. She felt abandoned. Sitting by the open windows of her Upper Circular Road houses, both of which stood on the main road, Ashapurna enjoyed the dynamics of the city. The rickshaw pullers and the hawkers trying to keep up with the rapid pace of city life, just as the office-goers did. Moreover, women from neighbouring houses dropped in at times. Therefore, gossip also became the source of some information for her writing. In contrast, the village of Majherpara ‘dozed in the shaded courtyard’. The pusillanimous mental make-up of women in that village could not give Ashapurna any mental satisfaction. Poor women! Their lives were encircled simply by the do’s and do-not’s of a superstitious everyday life. Under such a circumstance, Ashapurna was a lone voyager and she realized what the dear city of Calcutta had meant to her. The differences gradually became even clearer to her. Drawing a distinction between her pre-marital days and the days post her marriage, she leaves an epigrammatic note:

Within two years of my first publication, I was married and had to leave Calcutta. Thus the pace of my writing suffered for quite some time. For a girl, the in-laws’ house could not have been as soft as a bed of flowers. What’s more, the purdah here was far too complex …. It was nothing less than being imprisoned within the iron walls. Worse still was the lack of books in the village house. It was as if I was a fish out of water. (Devi 1976: 7)

It is quite evident that Ashapurna had to contend with a harsh reality because reading became the last thing in her life. There were almost no books in that house. She finished memorizing names of all the pilgrimages, names of all the post offices, and all the details from the natun panjika, the ‘new almanac’ (1976: 7). It must have been that the household chores and bratas (ritual penance, religious or secular) became a part of her life about which she does not discuss. But as mentioned before, Ashapurna tried to see the brighter side of all situations. She observed:

(p.79) It was good news for me that I did not have to stay in that [despicable] state for too long. Out of good intention they [my in-laws] decided to move to Calcutta. A house was rented at Ramesh Mitra Road, Bhawanipur. A fish struggling to survive out of water gets back to water all over again. (1976: 8)
It is quite clear that Ashapurna did not have to stay in the village for too long. But, coming out of the suffocating atmosphere of the village was indeed an event in Ashapurna’s life. Ashapurna also exposes the lack of education and the suppression of development in villages in those days of British-ruled India. One will observe as well that the motifs of inside-outside, village-city, are constantly juxtaposed in Ashapurna’s arguments. However, it needs to be noticed that Kalidas Gupta’s inconvenience to travel every weekend to the village initiated his parents (Sarojini Devi and Narendranath Gupta) to relocate the entire family, including their two younger sons, to Calcutta in 1926. For quite some time they retained good connections with the relatives in the village and flawlessly maintained all the religious commitments. Going to the village during the ‘Annapurna puja’ was a must, but had changed after the untimely death of the youngest son of Sarojini Devi and Narendranath Gupta. The Annapurna puja in the village house was started by Sri Purnanada Swami, a religious preceptor of the Gupta family (Ashapurna’s parental as well as in-laws’ family names/surnames were Gupta) who became the spiritual guide of Kalidas Gupta and later of Ashapurna Devi too. On becoming his disciples, Ashapurna Devi and her husband turned vegetarian. It was around the year 1930/1.

Around the period 1926–30, we see Ashapurna Devi struggling between familial and social commitments. Following all the religious and moral dictates, she endeavoured hard to keep up with the endless list of household chores, maintaining extended family relationships, three consecutive maternities (according to Nupur Gupta, Ashapurna’s daughter, Pushparenu, was born in 1926 and her son, Prasanta was born in c. 1927; her younger son, Sushanta, was born in 1929), and last of all her writing which she did at the dead of night as this was the only time she could call her own after fulfilling the grind of everyday life. It was indeed difficult for Ashapurna to maintain her habit of writing which she mastered very early in her life. There was no alternative left to her but to take time out of her quota of sleep. Along with her familial commitments, she wished to keep her publishers happy.
Locating Ashapurna’s challenging position, her desire to write vis-à-vis the demands of sansar, Nupur Gupta observes that, ‘... a daughter and two sons were born by this time. [Ashapurna, confined as she was] had to participate in all the routinized worship of the family idol, elaborate domestic rites and rituals to keep her mother-in-law happy. Again, she nursed her with earnest attention and marked obeisance; next to this, she took care of all relatives with genuine warmth and reticence. Facing with her children’s needs was also in her agenda .... In such an environment of rigid demands of the sansar, Ashapurna religiously, yet with difficulty accommodated her another chapter of her life —“the other Ashapurna”. ... Then, gradually unfolds the secret development of an intimate relationship with her inner self—the manifestation of her arduous literary endeavour ....’

The striking thing about her literary perseverance was the way she insulated it from all that the sansar had to offer. She never withdrew herself from participating in any of the family activities and events as pursuing her highly ‘self-absorbed’, ‘self-centred’ activity should be a silent affair. When asked, ‘Where do you get time to write?’ she answered, ‘Whenever I get time—and don’t forget I am a housewife—I have to attend to routine household chores. I would prefer mornings or evenings but when there are visitors how can I avoid them?’ (Mukherjee, Nandita 1995: 6–7).

(p.81) While Ashapurna Devi suggests the contrast between her duty towards her family and her intellectual activity, she also kept a ‘secure’ place for herself—a reserved interior space—the big ‘I’, which communicated with the world (the exterior), through the medium of writing. Indeed, that was the ‘autonomous subject’, the big ‘I’, the ‘self’ that had created a space for Ashapurna within the matrix of the household. She also became the ‘object of her will’ and chose to withdraw from all collected and shared acts of commitment to family into an entirely interior activity, but, as she said, that was presided by the goddess of learning, the only intruder. As mentioned earlier, she calls herself ‘Ma Saraswati’s stenographer’, as she always felt that whatever flowed from her pen was the dictate that she followed. On the other hand, she wondered whether any piece of writing could be free of the writer’s inevitable ‘I’? (Devi 1992c: 15). The combination of boldness and humility in Ashapurna gives a complex picture of an ‘anxiety’, which she said haunted her and ensnared her thought (Devi 1976: 7). Again, the small personal notes that she has left behind are portrayals of her own gender-marked experiences and are problematic because Ashapurna was not overly critical about her own life. Rather, she proclaimed her predicament to the world through her art of writing. Pratham Pratisruti (The First Promise) is an example of the accumulated repulsion and ‘anxiety’ that she felt within. As she said: ‘I have thought and written mostly about women because I have seen their helplessness and that is what I know best. Over the years, great clouds of protest have accumulated, unexpressed in my mind, and Satyabati, the heroine of my novel is the expression of that protest.’
In her own life, on the other hand, Ashapurna retained the likeness to the self-effacing Bengali woman who accommodated disparate situations in life patiently with smiling forbearance. Ashapurna’s journey from segregation and interiorization to the outside world is thus a journey to a new space which is a fusion of both.

Ashapurna Devi’s Sahitya Akademi acceptance speech on the occasion of being elected as one of its fellows in 1994 is important in this regard. ‘I am an insignificant worshipper of literature but nevertheless having lived in the realm of art for almost sixty-seven years I feel I should dwell a little on my literary endeavour.’

Indeed, Ashapurna achieved a ‘space of her own’, but her journey towards the world through complex terrains assumed its concreteness much later in her life. She journeyed through difficult segregated spaces depicting various stages of her life in the institution of family and the relationship to the public domain. She did not show any desire to venture out into the open space of public life until the elderly poet Naren Dev/Narendra Dev took it as a responsibility on himself to introduce Ashapurna into the literary circles in Calcutta. This was definitely an important part in the development of her life as a writer. Ashapurna records this evolution in her life in the essay, ‘Ja Dekhi, Tai Likhi’ (I Write What I See). With one deft stroke of her brush she paints a clear picture of the three phases of her life as a writer, ‘I am confined within four walls. The window is the limit through which I see the world. As it is, I am a girl born in an extremely orthodox family/and again, I am a wife, married to an almost similar conservative family/ Till I turned forty nobody knew Ashapurna Devi. Is it a male writer using a pseudonym?’ (Devi 1993c: 15).

Learning to read and write did not dislodge Ashapurna from the traditional world. The acuteness of the situation surfaced in reality when Naren Dev came to her Beltala house with a proposal to her to formally participate in a literary contest organized by Calcutta Chemicals. Finding the situation difficult to handle, a perplexed Ashapurna observed, ‘I was totally dumbfounded as I had no experience of talking to people other than (p.83) my relatives. Although I had been in literary pursuit for a long time .... I was bound within my house ... and to compete with all the established writers ...!’ (1989: 161–2).
The delicate description of the event throws a light to another dimension of the author’s character. She had complied with his wish, as she said, to deny any request was not in her nature. Later, although in a slightly different context, she said, ‘The trouble with me is that I cannot refuse any one. So I keep on meeting the constant demand which I cannot resist’ (Rangra 1983: 77). Thus, to defy Naren Dev, who was sort of a figure-head of the then literary circle in Calcutta, was impossible for her. After that came another invitation from the same company, but that was not for a story-writing competition. This time the invitation was for attending a literary meeting. It was an unimaginable situation for Ashapurna. She observed, ‘I felt somewhere a window had opened for me.... But I did not have the habit to go out of my home—at the most, the boundary extended to my near relatives .... Observing my hesitation, he [Naren Dev] said ... Alright, I shall come and take you along’ (Devi 1989: 162).

Ashapurna’s nervousness is visible. However, this unprecedented event was the beginning of a new era in her life. It changed the course of her stereotyped life forever. ‘The door that was closed so long was unlocked. Surprisingly the all-time orthodox people of this house [in Beltala] too became big-hearted .... I got the lease to go everywhere with ‘Dada’ .... Not only had he become my ‘dada’ he became my husband’s ‘dada’ too ... a relationship of love and respect was established’ (Devi 1989: 162).

The ‘contrary-tensions’ between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ underlines Ashapurna’s preoccupation with the restrictive social environment. Although the hidden personal history is also revealed after forty years of silence, in an important sense, she did not deviate from her prescribed roles of a wife and mother in the domestic household. She continued with her family responsibilities, but her husband Kalidas Gupta approved of her going out. The above passage also indicates that the outlook regarding male–female relationship in a middle-class household was changing and that the crucial links of inside–outside in practical terms were being reformed and reconstructed.

The observation on the interplay of varied tensions in a postcolonial society is not to discount Ashapurna’s achievements as a writer of ‘feminist texts’. Intricate constructions from the women’s point of view are constantly foregrounded by her. The trilogy, Pratham Pratisruti, Subarnalata, and Bakulkatha (The Chronicles of Bakul), is the best example. The three feminist texts represent the complexities of Bengali ‘changing social culture’ from the colonial to the postcolonial times, which would roughly spread across three generations. It is a representation of the struggle that women had to put up to come out of the ‘antahpur’.
Ashapurna was a ‘thinker’. She knew that until the compulsions on women (as devi [goddess] or as dasi [slave]) were removed from society, not only women’s progress, but also that of society at large, would be hindered. She insisted that the established notions of elevating a piece of land to the status of ‘heaven’ or mother goddess and combining with it the exaltation of mother as goddess, will not solve the problems of colonial injury. That was an exclusionary process amounting to ‘self-deception’ (Devi 1976: 10). In her writings, efforts to break stereotypes are prominent, but that was not aimed at denouncing the position of men in society. At the same time she puts forward a similar claim for women which they have been denied. Ashapurna was against the powerless situation of women to have an identity of their own, which was an exclusionary process defined by patriarchy. Satyabati’s protest was against that. Hers is an example of the rise of the revolutionary feminist consciousness challenging colonialism/imperialism on the one hand and reinforcement of patriarchy on the other. Many mainstream critics, naturally, dismissed Ashapurna’s works as ‘kitchen writing’ but that was
A young Ashapurna spinning the *charkha* at her maternal uncle’s house

AshaGupta’s parents, Harendranath Gupta and Saralasundari Devi
The five siblings—Ashapurna with her sister, Sampurna, and brothers, Birendranath, Dhirendranath, and Hirendranath

Ashapurna and her daughter, Pushparenu, c. 1944
The three siblings—Ashapurna Devi’s children, (clockwise from left) Pushprenu, Prasanta, and Sushanta
After 25 years of marriage—Ashapurna and her husband, Kalidas Gupta, on their way to Sonemarg, Kashmir, 1950

Ashapurna Devi with her husband, Kalidas Gupta, 1973
Ashapurna Devi and Kalidas Gupta with the family members on their 50th marriage anniversary, 1974

When the Garia house became home—Ashapurna Devi on the day of housewarming
Ashapurna Devi with her daughter, Pushparenu, and her daughter-in-law, Nupur

Reading at her residence in Garia, Kolkata
Ashapurna Devi with her granddaughters

Ashapurna Devi and Kalidas Gupta with their son, Sushanta Gupta, daughter-in-law, Nupur Gupta, and granddaughters, Satarupa (standing) and Satadeepa (seated), 1976
As they celebrated her 80th birthday—Ashapurna Devi and her family on the rooftop of her ‘dream house’, Garia, Kolkata, 1989

Ashapurna Devi, 1995

Ashapurna Devi being awarded the Gold Medal ‘Bhubanmohini Swarnapadak’, University of Calcutta, 1963
Silence and Its Contours

Ashapurna Devi with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi after receiving the Padma Shri, 1976

Ashapurna Devi receiving the Jnanpith Award from the then President of India, Sanjeeva Reddy, 1978
Ashapurna Devi delivering the acceptance speech after being conferred the Jnanpith Award, 1978

Ashapurna Devi at her home, seated by the statuette of Bagdevi and the citation plaque of the Jnanpith Award, 1980

Ashapurna Devi receiving the special honour, ‘Deshikottam’, from the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, 1989
Silence and Its Contours

Ashapurna Devi handing over the Ananda Puraskar to the writer Syed Mujtaba Siraj

Ashapurna Devi with Naren Dev and Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay
Poet Naren Dev and his wife, the writer Radharani Devi, with Ashapurna Devi at her Santiniketan residence ‘Ujjayinee’, 1963

Premendra Mitra reciting a poem on the occasion of the 50th marriage anniversary of Kalidas Gupta and Ashapurna Devi, 1974
Ashapurna Devi and Annadasankar Roy at Rabindrabharati University, 1987

Ashapurna Devi with the novelist Sailabala Ghoshjaya
Ashapurna Devi with Roma Chowdhuri (left) and with Mahasweta Devi (right)

(p.85) an ‘excuse to discredit the literary value of her work’ (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 476–7).

Ashapurna was aware of the criticisms and remained composed. Her response under such circumstances was, ‘I did not react much.’ She said,

I feel that there are differences in outlook on life and my outlook may not be accepted by all. I do not expect everyone to praise me and do not much wonder if somebody criticises me. I am fully aware of the contemporary criticism which is not honest. But as here is adulteration in other walks of life, we cannot expect much purity in the field of literary criticism also. I don’t bother myself much about such criticism. (Rangra 1983: 77)

Ashapurna did not have the time to bother herself with criticism or appreciation. A conspicuous aspect of her personal story is the negotiation of her domestic life and her public life. Ashapurna was a dedicated daughter-in-law, a loving partner to her husband, and an ideal mother. Time that would be entirely her own, that would be for her literary activity was naturally scarce. It was sheer conviction that pulled her through all the demands and disappointments and sorrows in her life. Simultaneous to her family commitments was her ‘unshakable determination’ to comply with her publisher’s demands and that included also the publications for Puja festive numbers and also smaller publications in local clubs. Indeed, Ashapurna was a prolific writer, but that was one part of the ‘complete’ self. Here it would be appropriate to read through Sushanta Gupta’s recollection about his mother:

Despite being a wife in a middle class household, married [off] at an early age, with a domineering mother-in-law, who insisted that she should discipline herself to become the role model wife, my mother could not put down her pen .... My mother fulfilled her family responsibilities completely and then devoted her spare time to writing. To us it has always appeared that for mother, her family was of primary importance and that writing was secondary. She had no fixed hours for writing. She wrote when and where she could. (Dasgupta 2002: 4)
It is ultimately the ‘inner strength’ that survives over all odds and complies with the outside. It was ‘this other self [that] forced me to write.\textsuperscript{22}

The remark, although personal, also indicates a greater purpose to give recognition to the women’s experience. Gradually, Ashapurna’s domestic duties became less, old age with deteriorating health conditions crept in. No matter in whatever difficult situation, Ashapurna remained steady and consistently worked hard. Her writing time spilled over to late nights or even early mornings of the next day to keep pace with the publishers’ demand. But at times she could not.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, her distinctive contribution to Indian literary feminism is celebrated by the leading feminist scholars of today, such as Jasodhara Bagchi, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, and Sanjukta Dasgupta. They acknowledged and praised the authenticity of Ashapurna’s fictional representations. Since Ashapurna ‘had never been exposed to Western theories, as she had no access to English or foreign languages’ what she wrote was completely ‘her original thoughts, but based on her personal experience and her analysis of women’s place in society’ (Sen 1997: viii). At the age of eighty-two, Ashapurna admitted that she wrote to fulfil the demands of her readers.

She actually did so. Her tremendous faith in her readers and her dutiful compliance to her publishers’ demand kept her pen busy till her last days until she was absolutely bedridden. Ashapurna Devi died of pneumonia on 13 July 1995, having secured for herself an undisputed position as one of the pioneers of twentieth-century Bengali women’s writing. Awards and prizes were heaped upon her during her lifetime that included the \textbf{(p.87)} prestigious Jnanpith Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Rabindra Puraskar. She was also awarded the Padma Shree and many other prizes which have been listed in the Annexure.
In brief, it can be said Ashapurna had benefitted from experiencing life in all its variety. She had experienced all the fulfilment as a writer. She had achieved success, earned fame, and attained economic independence along with a space she could call her own. Ashapurna Devi breathed her last in her own house in south Calcutta. This house was built according to her specifications. It had a southward facing balcony, a staircase leading to an open roof terrace, and well lit, airy bedrooms—all that Ashapurna had ever dreamt of. Above all, this house had given her a room of her choice that had been absent in her early life. Therefore, one can say that commitment to self, the ‘other self’ as Ashapurna would put it, became a privileged access to a superior reality. Her experiences and abilities were close to those that a whole range of otherwise ordinary women might possess. Ashapurna Devi linked them up with the superior competence of her writing and thereby carved out a niche for herself. Her endeavour expressed an economic freedom that came from the proceeds of her own publications. Her mortal body might have perished, but the silent lives she wished to express through her writing still remains in safe custody, her readers have taken hold of her entire being, which is the essence of her self. This is ‘her story’, a story that has explained a complex yet highly individual, self-absorbed endeavour, exhausted of any further possibilities. Her life determined by activities, display the life of a professional writer. Ashapurna Devi was a career woman in its truest sense. Besides her integrity towards publications, she also travelled and gave public lectures on literature, culture, and on issues concerning women’s upliftment. She was an active member of PEN. Renowned writers and luminaries, both male and female, of the time came to her house and that included Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya, Manoj Basu, Premendra Mitra, Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyaya, Asit Bandyopadhyay, Srikumar Bandyopadhyaya, Bani Roy, Leela Mazumdar, Pratibha Basu, and Hemanta Mukherjee, among many others.

It was a Sunday meeting (adda) held in rotation in any of the houses of the luminaries where literary discussions and decisions on the variety of future course of actions were taken. In this changed environment one can only guess Ashapurna’s observations on literature and society.

In the last part of the trilogy, Bakulkatha, which covers the period after Independence, Ashapurna demonstrates significant changes in society. Bakul had an access to education. She also had economic independence. Of course she was caught at the crossroads of complex social models, but she displayed the courage to take her own decisions. She was sure about the needs of her body and mind. Thus she saw the limits of marriage and detested it as the surest formulae for acquiring status in society. She had the time to take a mature decision and chose to remain single, unlike her mother and grandmother who were married at the age of eight and nine and had to endure the brunt of child marriage. A voyeuristic vision had started to thaw and the female body became less objectified. Yet, Ashapurna was sceptical about the changed condition.
Annexure: Accolades*

Ashapurna Devi (1909–1995) has been widely honoured with a number of prizes and awards. Some of them are noted below.

- The Leela Prize, University of Calcutta (1954)
- The Motilal Ghosh Prize, Amrita Bazar Patrika (1959)
- The Bhuban Mohini Dasi Gold Medal, University of Calcutta (1963)
- The Rabindra Puraskar, Government of West Bengal (1966)
- The Bharatiya Jnanpith Award for Pratham Pratisruti (1976)
- The Padma Shree Award, Government of India (1976)
- The Bhubaneshwari Medal, Sishu Sahitya Parishad (1976)
- The Haranath Ghosh Medal, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (1986)
- The Sarat Award (1989)
- The Jagattarini Gold Medal, University of Calcutta (1993)
- Fellowship conferred by the Sahitya Akademi, its highest honour (1994), for her contribution as a novelist and short-story writer
- Awarded D.Litt by the University of Jabalpur (1983), Rabindra Bharati University (1987), Burdwan University (1988), and Jadavpur University (1990)

(p.90) Resisting Silence: Ashapurna Challenging Hegemony?
In the preceding sub-section it has been noted that Ashapurna Devi could simultaneously look back at the past generations and think ahead of her times with natural ease. The present attempt explores this particular trend of creative freedom and investigates the complexity involved in understanding the life and works of a writer. We know by now that Ashapurna Devi experienced the colonial times as well as the post times (that is, the postcolonial as well as the post postcolonial times). To be more explicit, here, the post times would mean both colonialism and the subsequent process of the recovery from the colonial injury in independent India immediately after the official end of the colonial era. Also, the post times would indicate the continued influence of the interplay and tensions between changes and continuities of traditions and modernities on the postcolonial as well as on the post postcolonial times on the culture and identity during the last part of the twentieth century. This chapter is an engagement with the anxiety of the incompleteness and contestations of transition and transformation and addresses their influence on reading life stories. To have a fuller understanding of the life story of a writer, autobiographical readings should be studied together with the local history, literary representation of the times, along with the available biographical explorations. The combined study, in the words of Linda Anderson, helps ‘to shore up an approach to the meaning of literary works through the author’ (1988: 6).

Although Anderson is known for her works mainly on Western autobiography as a genre, her analysis, I feel, is pertinent to understanding the historical and cultural contexts that shaped Ashapurna’s life and her works. If I can anticipate it right, the combination will display an independent attitude of mind and action. Ashapurna’s writings do display that ‘literature and society move on parallel tracks’, but she was also honest enough to admit the schism between the pre-thoughts and the practice of writing and declared the impossibility of negating the inevitable ‘I’ (Devi 1992c: 15).

Moreover, Ashapurna did not submit to the politics of power associated with the harsh binaries like the colonizer/West/male and the colonized/East/female. Her’s was a slow and careful move towards the women’s question. In her creative efforts she remained true to the indigeneity of Bengali language and culture. She was of course resilient to what was good of ‘the Western influence’ (Devi 1988). A point one cannot forgo before analysing Ashapurna Devi’s life as a writer is that she did not write an autobiography. She explained her reservations to write one:
To write an autobiography, I feel one has to be very faithful. Life is not a bed of roses; it has its painful side also. There are people who have come in my way. It is not easy and possible to depict them and if I may add, is not proper as well. One cannot write as honestly as one should be in writing an autobiography. *Private truth* and *social truth* are different and complicated. Truth cannot be revealed in its entirety. This has to be confessed. But life is like that .... There is the question of our environment. There are people who are connected with my life whom I cannot portray. But there is still something more .... (Rangra 1983: 75)

***(p.92)*** Her observation indicates a deeper truth veiled by the apparent. Moreover, the incorporation of the public into her private life cannot be overlooked because her dynamic way of thinking leads to at least two unsettling aspects: (i) Ashapurna had expressed herself before the public gaze by publishing at the age of thirteen; (ii) she repeatedly attempted to negotiate with the oppositional construction of femininity/domestic and the independent. Both ‘contested the structures that were shaping early twentieth century Bengali (Indian) women’ (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 154). What follows is an examination of Ashapurna’s impressive agency as a writer. The discursive space offered by Ashapurna and her wide-ranging understanding of women’s life as contained within various conscriptions of domesticity and the personal challenges women themselves took, invites engagement. The attempt here will be to read real life and representation together as far as possible.

II

Let us begin with the historical conflicts and the confusions of the time Ashapurna inhabited. Ashapurna grew up in an overarching atmosphere of colonialism and when the complexities of the ‘anti colonial movement’ had gained their way to free India from the clutches of British rule.27 It was then deemed essential that children, especially the girls, should observe certain restrictions mainly as family-oriented protective measures for several reasons of fear that also caused anguish among parents. There was the internal fear of ostracization for declining from superstitions and beliefs (and several personal interpretations on them, like, an educated girl/woman becomes blind herself or causes her husband’s death). There was also the fear of the forces from external influence on family. Both had its bearing on the freedom of children. The most common reasons for child protection from external influence during those days were ‘fear (p.93) of westernization’, and also for some ‘British encouragement of prostitution and slavery’.28 There was a mixed tension in the atmosphere. Ashapurna describes an indelible experience of the restrictions in her essay ‘I Write What I See’ and exposes an inherent sense of fear in her parents: 
In our house we had no scope of talking to anybody other than our relatives. My father late Harendranath Gupta was an artist [of the famous British C. Lazarus Company] .... He knew many other people who used to come to our house; but there was no chance for us to meet them. We somehow hung around and managed to peep from outside to see—a 'writer' has come, an 'artist' has come and that was all. (Devi 1992c: 14)

Ashapurna’s family-centred world view suggests that familial protective measures led to several other restrictions on women. In the volatile days of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century these measures were conflated with certain national requirements to maintain the internal spiritual superiority of the East over the external material superiority of the West. The East-West dichotomy influenced the restructuring of the social space by gender roles into *ghar/griha* home and *bahir*/outside. The days of the anti-colonial movement and its aftermath also witnessed the ‘contradictory and heterogeneous’ moves between ‘changes’ influenced by the intrusion of new ideas from the West and ‘continuities’ of Indian tradition and pride in the national self-identity by returning to the past. Therefore, we see that there were oppositions between the East and the West, between tradition and modernity (or modernities), between the past and the present. The interplay and tension between changes and continuities, had its impact on the ‘micro-politics’ of everyday familial experience and unavoidably continued to have its flow sustained in a renewed way in the early twentieth century and later. Reflecting on the contradictions of the colonial times and its bearing on the family atmosphere, Ashapurna observed:

(p.94) During my childhood there used to be two trends in our house—absolutely opposite trends. The terms, left-right [Westernizers-traditionalists] were not in vogue then, hence, they might be termed East-West trends .... In between the conflict of these two trends our childhood was quite enjoyable. The reason for the enjoyment being the fight was in the air; with no reason for any pressure on insignificant mortals like us .... Among the bearers of these two trends, one (in contemporary circumstances) was thoroughly loyal to his sovereign, while the other was totally anti-establishment, uncompromisingly nationalist—a ‘swadeshi’ to the core. According to one anything British is the best. Therefore he was happy and proud to bring in, whatever necessary or not, and fill the house with anything British. In the opinion of the other, whatever that is British should be boycotted, and it is a matter of disgrace to have them in the house.

(Devi 1983: 58-9)
Ashapurna draws a clear distinction between the ‘modernizing’ impulse of her father, that was too British, and her mother’s anti-colonial perspectives to follow the nationalist consensus of reorganization of the existing traditional social structure. The climate (domestic air) as revealed was in a state of flux and the ideas that circumscribed the family were still in instability. There are also indications of the ideas of at least two prominent fathers of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle—Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘atmasakti’ and Mahatma Gandhi’s ‘charkha’, both intended to build and rebuild support for indigenous goods. The national perspective thus blended and became one with the social and the familial.

Subarnalata, the pro-Independence minded eponymous heroine of the novel Subarnalata (in which Ashapurna depicts the era in which she grew up), however, will not stop to put the ‘tricky’ question of choice that women of her time had to put up with—the prescriptive regulations, political and social patterns that women had to negotiate with to make an entry to the public sphere, to which I shall return shortly. Subarnalata visits the ‘Swadeshi Mela’ (fair of indigenous daily provisions and (p.95) clothings) and comes back from the fair loaded with swadeshi clothes, swadeshi matches, and swadeshi soap. Her actions were of course condemned by her husband Prabodh (a businessman by profession), and some of the family members. She was called ‘a lunatic’. Yet, Subarnalata will campaign for swadeshi goods. She insisted that everybody buys Dhakai sarees because that’s something produced by the local artisans (Mazumdar 1997: 76).

Thus far Ashapurna’s childhood memories, her critical thinking, and literary representation of them expose almost no hope as regards ‘conjugal relationships’, which was one of the objectives of the nationalist construct of the ‘new woman’. Ashapurna seems to have failed to romanticize the relationships. The actuality of the contemporary experience, not only concerning husband-wife relationship, but also children’s, especially girls’ relationship to their parents and the relationship of all, young or old alike, to society, is likely to present a far more complex picture. It is partially noted that linked to the interlacing complexities of protection were the changes, continuities, and even discontinuities of the tradition of familial values and the changing social roles of Indian men and women. Associated with all these is another complication—the ideas of the process of socialization, that of the girl child who would be moulded to the normative model of Indian womanhood.
It was a common belief (here, among the Bengali middle-class) that: ‘The proper socialisation of the girl child was the family’s gateway to bliss’ (Bagchi 1993: 2214). Essentially a nineteenth-century construct, the socialization process involved observing rites and bratas (ritual penance) maintained ‘within the family [so] that the girl child finds her natural habitat’ (quoted in Bagchi 1993). It definitely involved some rigorous training and it may be argued as well that in essence the bratas remained an isolated private affair. It was so. However, Margaret E. Noble, known for ‘her swadeshi crusade to preserve the beauty and perfection of the Hindu way of life, (p.96) appreciated the ‘completeness’ in the old educational values. She celebrated the education imparted as ‘secular knowledge’ and stated what ‘India has … done on the religious and social plane’ are that which the West (that is, Europe) was ‘trying in the kindergarten, to do on the scientific (quoted in Bagchi 1993: 2216). The education associated with the socialization process also imparted a kind of ‘secular joy’ essential to hold the society together, she observed. Commenting on the ‘completeness’ of the tradition of the ‘old’ education in Bengal, Margaret Noble also mentions, ‘Very little that deserves the name of Education has been attempted in modern India. A machine has been created’ (1906: 92).

Ashapurna, in her own life, experienced the process of socialization. She perceptively observes:

The advantage of being born in an extremely orthodox family was to be let off from schooling .... [There is no dearth of doubt about it], because if a girl goes to school...she will become ‘fashion’ conscious and garrulous. Not a soul in the family had better grasp over this than my grandmother, and the mother-adoring son/s had no power to overrule her conceptions. (1997: 4)

Thus, the decision of Nistarini Devi (Ashapurna’s grandmother) in disciplining a girl child was the last word in Gupta-barī (Gupta family). She was the chief of the family and so it was her responsibility to mould all the girls in the family (including the extended family). Even though Harendranath and Saralasundari had moved out of the joint-family set up, to carry on with the instructions of the chief of the family was the accepted custom. Of course, as noted, things were a little easier for little Ashapurna and her sisters than many other girls of her age because they had for their mother a literate lady with a refined understanding about education.
Saralasundari had a propensity towards maintaining ‘penance, fasts and rituals’ which are parts of the old education, but she never imposed on her children the rules of performing the (p.97) bratas or to read religious texts (which was also a part of the socializing process). Ashapurna had developed her own way of thinking from quite a young age and she valued the contents of the texts of the ‘old’ education that taught about developing patience, cultivating a sense of care, duty, and acknowledgement of human ties. Later she also debated the ‘significance of the rituals’ and the public value of the ‘old’ education in modern society in her essay ‘Society and the Role of Women’ and in her fictions (for example, in Subarnalata).

During the days of the anti-colonial struggle, the socialization process, essentially religion-based, is said to have acquired a wider social and political connotation. It helped girls/women of Bengal to create a space for themselves and ‘made their participation easy and natural’ in the anti-colonial struggle (Ray 2002, 1995). Society was also assured of a kind of stability that was needed in those days of domination of British culture. A balance was also maintained in human relationship, but what were the responsibilities of the babus (the gentlemen) towards the society, especially those who whiled away their time playing poker and cards (Devi 1967: 77).
A slight digression would be useful here to understand the symbolic weight of the ‘old’ education on the Indian (Bengali) society. Rabindranath Tagore acknowledged the borderless ideals taught by the ‘old’ education. According to him those ideals enabled women to play the role in maintaining stability and allegiance to social ties. In this regard, in Gora (1910), one cannot forget the role of Anandamoyi, as the archetypal mother, who adopts Gora—the ‘orphaned boy’, although the antagonism she faced had to be resolved piecemeal by various adjustments. In his essay, ‘Woman’ (1917), Tagore maintained, ‘[The] ideal of stability is deeply cherished in woman’s nature [what he calls as feminine] .... All her forces instinctively work to bring things to some shape of fullness’. Thus, according to him, the instinctive nature in women enabled them to imbibe and disseminate (p.98) the knowledge in the old education quite naturally in the family as well as help in social transformation. Rabindranath tried to absorb this non-violent ‘feminine’ nature in his own life and portrayed the anxiety of rejection by modern society quite prominently in the character of Nikhilesh in his novel Ghare Baire (1916) [published as The Home and the World (1919)]. Banking on the strength in feminine stability as an antidote to the coercion India was facing then, Rabindranath Tagore also wrote ‘Streer Patra’ (1914; The Wife’s Letter). Mrinal, the protagonist in ‘Streer Patra’ says, ‘Have no fear ... Mirabai too was a woman like me ... but she did not need to die in order to live’ (218). The presence of the queen-turned-saint, Mirabai’s life-story and that too a widow’s story, in Mrinal’s day-to-day living demonstrates that the independent voices of women were prominent in ancient India, and that the rights and hopes of women in modern society were assured by a return to the past.

III
Similarly, it can be said that Ashapurna Devi’s Satyabati, the protagonist of the novel *The First Promise*, by resorting to the traditional cultural resources, mythology, and history, transcends the sense of a woman’s limitations that weighed upon the complex times of colonial regime, as India moved towards the birth of the modern nation. According to Partha Chatterjee, the women’s question was absorbed within the nationalist project of reformation and reconstruction of tradition. But, we also know from the same discourse that the nationalist struggle added a new dimension to the position of women in India. Any reader will find the young woman Satyabati a rebel from the beginning of the novel. She fights for ‘freedom’ from a patriarchal and colonial society and refuses to ‘suffer in silence’ (Chowdhury 2004: 73). For that she will not submit to ‘the typical conceptions of gender roles in traditional patriarchy’ (34) (like the notion of purity, the pressure of maintaining the familial ties in a joint family at the cost of the sufferings of young women as widows when men could have co-wives, and also women inflicting pain on other women younger than them). She will not stop questioning every little thing of the domestic world, where ritual practices in smallest details dictate women’s day-to-day existence, and the ignorance and orthodox beliefs that circumscribed their life. In fact, Satyabati questions her father and insists: ‘If the co-wife were indeed like a sister, why would so many chants be composed? .... The real reason is that men don’t understand the magnitude of pressure on the mind of the co-wife’ (Chowdhury 2004: 70). She will also question about ‘right conduct and custom’ (Chowdhury 2004: 95), which were the catchwords of the day, and will move forward with the changing times.
In this regard, her interactions with her father, Ramkali, are interesting. There are innumerable examples spread all over the book. I will not attempt detailing but what needs to be noted is that she made her father see sense. Ramkali should be more considerate towards the ‘female sex’ (Chowdhury 2004: 75). On the other hand, Satyabati takes the help of traditional resources like taking aid of her father’s speciality in Ayurvedic medicine to save her second cousin Jata’s wife who was almost taken for dead (Chowdhury 2004: 20). Taking all the examples together which are also rooted in gender conflicts, it can be said that Satyabati was prompted by an equal sense of both social justice and gender justice which were doubly lacking in colonial villages of Bengal. One cannot fail to notice that she is also able to argue using her own rationality in day-to-day life situations as much as she takes up issues that affected human lives, both men and women. Satyabati is also able to cross the bounds of the society through sheer conviction. She attempts to break the patriarchal threshold which subjugates a woman and continues her studies after marriage, and later on takes up teaching elderly girls and visits the house of Keshab Chandra Sen (p.100) (a reformist of the nineteenth-century Brahmo Samaj). According to Nabakumar, Satyabati has violated the limits of the Hindu woman who should safeguard the very core of Hinduism. She cannot be tolerated to choose her own way of thinking and judging religion. This was an oral story from an elder generation of Ashapurna’s from where the contradictions between tradition and orthodoxy or even tradition and modernity come alive.

Biases, taboos, and social constraints, indeed have their deep impact on tender minds, and Satyabati’s first promise as a child bride was to resist the prevalent orthodox patriarchal culture without delaying to ‘learn’ because she was certain that ‘It can never be a sin to learn’ (Chowdhury 2004: 124). It needs to be noted that Ashapurna allows comparisons between varied shades of the roles tradition and orthodoxy, and tradition and modernity play in the life of those who are at the receiving end. Satyabati boldly declared, ‘But, do you know that I can write too?’ (Chowdhury 2004: 125). That Satyabati could assert herself and move about with ‘unabated vigour just as she pleased’, as mentioned in the starting of the story, was because ‘her father viewed her unfettered conduct with a lenient eye’. She combined her protests against issues like lack of literacy and pressure of the orthodoxy—particularly in the villages—and juxtaposed her arguments quickly with the strong assertion that Saraswati (traditionally, a deity of learning and dispenser of knowledge), ‘herself is a woman’ (Chowdhury 2004: 122–9). Young Satyabati’s feminist proclamation, or as Ashapurna puts it through Satyabati’s biography, brings to the fore certain valid arguments pertaining to scriptural sanctions and rational thinking, which are not always opposed to each other.35
Practical sense tells her that reading books cannot be against religion. If need be, why not take aid of the modern English education. Satyabati’s move towards new education acquires a new salience as far as women’s emancipation was concerned. The benefits of modernity that came with ‘print capitalism’ could not be an exclusively men’s preserve. In the domain of education there cannot be any division. Moreover, to overcome their subjugation at several levels, young women had to overcome the barriers of language. Primarily for that, Satyabati comes outside the boundaries of the ‘home’—from the ‘physical confines’ of rural environment of her husband’s village—to Calcutta, the urban centre, for health and education. She takes this bold step when women’s education (which were mainly religious-texts-based) was still conducted within the confines of the home, and orthodoxy condemned women’s exercising of intellect as a public activity. It is also quite clear that rural Bengal remained left out of modern development programmes. In such a situation, to relocate her family and to learn English was indeed a struggle for Satyabati; but the author reminds her readers that she was helped by Master Bhabotosh Biswas. We have discussed this earlier and will not go into further details here. Of course she is condemned by the villagers as a selfish woman because she has stepped ‘outside’ her marital home to accompany her husband to Calcutta and she has to pay the price for this by sacrificing her daughter Subarnalata as a child bride. Naturally, for Subarnalata things became far more difficult. Satyabati’s husband, Nabakumar, was a ‘weakling’ but her father Ramkali was steeped in traditional knowledge. Satyabati would always love to argue and return to him. Subarnalata had neither. As indicated, she could not have had a support from her father. Her husband, Prabodh, most of the time was trapped in the bizarre plans of his mother. Moreover, for Subarnalata things were a little more intricate. She lived during the days of the most complex times of anti-colonial nationalist struggle in Bengal.

As far as reconstruction of tradition was concerned, both Tagore and Gandhi, the anti-colonial nationalists, reclaimed the past (although their views differed at times). Reclaiming the past was important for both of them, and its usefulness in the colonial context is registered in their works. In fact (p.102) Ashapurna discusses the influence of both Tagore and Gandhi in Subarnalata. Moreover, Ashapurna was an avid reader and was aware of their contributions. In fact, Tagore had a continued influence on Ashapurna. She even contested his views at several places. Ashapurna exercised Tagore’s thoughts and ideas in the critical dismantling of her philosophy of life and in her creative practice. Stating almost what Tagore had said about India’s history, she questioned the ‘distractions and illusions’ and the ‘complex problem’ that ensued in modern Indian society. She underscored the source as the ‘influx of the western waves’ and said,
In our land, ‘Bharatbarsha’, there is no dearth of guides to show the way to those who are at a loss. Since time immemorial, in every era, great souls have arrived to show us the proper way, great priests and ascetics have come to lead us through the right path, and then come the social workers, philosophers and learned people with pure souls to row the boat out of the waves of crisis. This is why, despite being stricken by several attacks and being divided by many opinions, ‘Bharat’ has not lost its spiritual strength. Its imperishable existence thus remained unaffected. (1962)37

Ashapurna did not lack the knowledge of the spiritual strength embedded in the history of old education of ‘Bharat’. Neither did she disrespect the dynamism of the modern education. She also knew that Tagore had also ‘participated in shaping the modern consciousness in India’, but she did not fully advocate Tagore’s views on woman and the ‘ideal of stability’. Her’s was a strategic but steady move towards the inclusion of the women’s question within the paradigm of change. What she suggested was that the mass of middle-class Bengal (in India) was not prepared to absorb the fast changes of the times (for example, the fissures in the joint family system, going outside to school); and as far as the twin issues of women’s question—women’s education and self-emancipation—were concerned, the tradition not only needed to be reinvented, but it had to (p. 103) be recovered from its limitations with alertness to the needs of the time. The grounds to absorb the changes had to be laid first not simply by returning to the past, or, merely by breaking away from the past. The ‘dogma-bound’ ‘custom-blinded’ men and patriarchal mothers will have to broaden their sphere of knowledge to recover from the colonial situation (Sen 1997: viii). Education would be the first step for that.

The revolutionary beginning was made by women like Satyabati (as in The First Promise). She took difficult paths to reach to a point of satisfaction and to some practical solution from where women could communicate with the outside world, at least partially. Subarnalata, her only daughter, was also sent to a convent school in Calcutta, but we know that was cut short. Elokeshi, her grandmother, helped by her son, Nabakumar, conspired to undermine Satyabati’s dreams and marry off her daughter in secret. Ashapurna could not believe that ‘emptying India’s history of all conflicts’, to use Maitrayee Chaudhuri’s words, would erase the cultural impositions on women. In fact, the task she took upon herself was to commemorate the efforts of the lonely mothers and foremothers of the mute domestic space on the face of several impediments.
She saw her own mother making every effort to read in the joint family, and that too in a conservative one. Ashapurna recollects further that her mother eagerly opted for a nuclear family as her father offered to shift to a company accommodation. Ashapurna makes it very clear that her mother did not have any fights with her in-laws but that she was not reluctant to have a new life—a new space of her own where no prejudices will stop her from reading. No more hassles to have books as her companion and to read in secret.

In *The First Promise*, Ashapurna calls attention to Satyabati’s acute perception about the need for equality in education between girls and boys. Satyabati reminded her brother Neru about the lack of education in villages and that ‘[s]o many women read and (p.104) write in Calcutta’, the urban centre of colonial administration, but that the villages remained neglected. She also boldly asserted that whatever partiality women suffer, especially in villages, patriarchal ‘men have made all that up’ (Chowdhury 2004: 124). Satyabati’s life-story as mentioned above also points out that she was prompted to travel to Calcutta not only because of education but also because of the health care facilities. Satyabati’s promising attitude (in spite of several constraints) also represents that the nineteenth-century women’s struggle had a persistent hold upon Ashapurna’s mind. Indira Chowdhury, a postcolonial historian has discussed Ashapurna’s perceptive analysis on the neglect of rural population in her introduction to the English translation, *The First Promise*. Ashapurna also highlights the sense of a crisis in health in *Subarnalata*. She seriously delved into Subarnalata’s health problems (for example) and showed that health care facilities, women’s issues, and India’s freedom struggle were interlinked but that medical treatment for women needed to be taken up with better care and attention. She saw the situation as a ‘problematic’ interlocking of historical conflicts. The crisis that was experienced by the rural population, as observed by Chowdhury, ‘exacerbated by recurrent fevers and epidemics that ravaged Bengal in the nineteenth century’ (2004: xxi). 38 has now invaded the urban centres like Calcutta. ‘The epidemic of plague broke out in Calcutta—more dangerous than cholera, more terrifying than typhoid’ (Mazumdar 1997: 83). But that was not all.

*Subarnalata* reveals a deep analysis of life. As Ashapurna observes,

Generations clash with one another, a decade slips into another. Where does one draw a line to distinguish one from the other? Does a curtain ever come down to mark the end? No. Who would ever get the chance to pull down a curtain, when the flow is endless? What does define a period is the progress of man, his thoughts, and his actions. But there are people who appear far ahead of their time. They are the ones to crash through barriers. They are the ones to (p.105) create ripples in the stagnant pool of tradition. Very rarely are they understood or appreciated by their contemporaries.
They are the misfits ....

But even in their apparent failure, these misfits leave a trail of hope ....
(Mazumdar 1997: Prologue)

It is quite clear from Ashapurna’s perceptive analysis that there was no question of revenge as far as the relationship between the two sexes was concerned, but she had a deep analysis of a woman’s various strands of deprivation and the way she wages the struggle for identity and recognition.

IV

In Ashapurna Devi’s own life, we have observed that ‘a trail of hope’ was assured primarily by her mother Saralasundari. Certainly she was a ‘misfit’ in the conservative Gupta-bari and in society itself. We have discussed the contradictions in the last chapter. All that I would like to mention here is that as far as ‘beauty and aesthetics’ were concerned, Tagore had a great influence on their family life. Subarnalata, Ashapurna said, is a ‘life story’. It is a story of Subarnalata losing several battles in spite of a brave and persistent struggle. This was because nobody in her family (her marital home) could appreciate the need for something that was not directly related to the needs of the household (Mazumdar 1997: 24). But in her lonely moments the poems in the book was like a shaft of light that came in through the broken window (Mazumdar 1997: 165). Subarnalata thought that the poems should be read aloud and shared with others. She thought: ‘Was the poet writing about a water fall? Or was he talking about me?’ (Mazumdar 1997: 183).

In an illiterate atmosphere that Subarnalata had to pass her days, a feeble ray of hope came to her from Jayabati and her husband (a distant relative to Subarna through marriage). Jayabati’s friendship was like a lifeline that kept the child bride Subarna alive and sane during the most difficult first five years while she stayed in the old joint property and later when Subarna fell ill. Subarna did not see Jayabati’s husband but in her heart she felt an affection and regard for him. The couple encouraged her to read and even bought her a book of Tagore’s poems. A secret passage was used by Jayabati to pass the ‘book’ just as she did with other books, but it was made sure that the poor girl got what she wanted (Mazumdar 1997: 164–5). Subarnalata promised to herself ‘I’ll do what is required of me’—will finish all errands, sit quietly to read this book, and learn every poem written in it (Mazumdar 1997: 183).
But that is not all, Ashapurna said. Subarnalata is the story of a particular time, a time that has passed, but whose shadow still hovers over our social system (Mazumdar 1997: vii). The uncomfortable realities of the ‘colonial encounter’ do not need an elaborate explanation here. The reconstruction of the ravaged condition of Bengal had to start by all means. As Ashapurna recollects ‘the escalating price of daily goods’ (Devi 1997: 42), and varied tensions and contradictions of the colonial times which affected the family atmosphere, she was hopeful that the economic constraints at least in the middle-class families would reduce the general desire of the fathers for virtues by performing the ceremony of gauridan (marrying daughters off at the age of eight or before puberty) (Mazumdar 1997: 165). The fear and anxiety of the parents regarding the fate that awaited the child bride at their in-laws would perhaps also reduce.

Ashapurna, as we have read through the pages, had always been considerate of the specific conditions of colonial society, but she was against silencing the struggle of the history of the mothers and foremothers. In Subarnalata, as in Pratham Pratisruti, she puts a sharp query to the uncertainty in women’s lives (which is the primary focus in this chapter) and the often invisible myriad conflicts women were facing then in their daily lives, especially those young wives whose ‘goals’ were different. Ashapurna observed:

It was wrong of Muktokeshi (Subarnalata’s mother-in-law) to have left for Navadweep. If she had stayed, none of her sons would have had to suffer .... Besides ... what could be more dangerous than a young Swadeshi? Perhaps ... Subarna had already fallen into the trap? Perhaps she was already friendly with that awful man [the Swadeshi nationalist Ambika]? Who knew, may be that was why she had not written even once. (Mazumdar 1997: 91)

It is noted that even when the new form of the conjugal family had long been institutionalized, the mutually possessive mother-son relationship that often had retrogressive effects on the family life of the son continued. Prabodh had tried once to say something in Subarna’s favour, save one careless remark from him wiped out any praise that might have come her way.

Moreover, as the above example reveals, Ashapurna laid bare the fact that a young woman was also a victim of suspicion. Subarnalata has now lived her family life for quite some time, but ‘control’, ‘suspicion’, and ‘misunderstanding’ were unending for her. Subarnalata had experienced the same when she was a new child bride. ‘Even to look at another man was a crime’ for her (Mazumdar 1997: 8). So, her wish to have a veranda that would overlook the street and help her in overcoming the feelings much like a prisoner was denied.
The main contention is that a woman’s life is determined by marriage and motherhood, and that too her early marriage and consequent trappings in reproductivity. (As far as mothering in quick succession is concerned, Subarnalata is a mirror image of Saralasundari, besides other similarities.) Nine-year-old Subarnalata was left with no option but to wish that her mother hear her heart’s cry. But that was never to happen. Satyabati had left her home in utter dejection because she could not save ‘a young and innocent life’. Her father stopped visiting her after suffering consecutive humiliation from her in-laws primarily (p.108) because he could not ‘control’ his wife. Subarnalata trembled with ‘fear and despair’ but could not protest. In utter despair she asked herself ‘wasn’t she supposed to go to school like her brothers? Didn’t her mother promise her that?’

For both the mother and the daughter the goals were different from most of their family members. But both would not submit to the limitations that circumscribe them. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, a scholar, novelist, and poet, observes: ‘Schooling had become the central symbol of independence’ for Subarnalata, just like her mother’s (Mazumdar 1997: Introduction). To overcome the limitations, both biological and social, all the daughters of the country needed an access to school education. Subarnalata was sensitive to the needs of her children as she was to the country’s needs. Naturally, she was a misfit in her family. Yet, she insists that Parul (her second from last daughter, although no more a little girl) should go to school. Bhanu, her eldest son, should take the initiative to get her admitted. He was an adult now and he must fulfil his duty. Parul has read enough at home but there is a need to come out of the boundaries of the home—that would be ‘a step towards emancipation’. But that did not happen because Bhanu did not see through his mother’s reasons. The basic awareness of education amongst the males in the family was lacking.

However, a turn of event brings certain changes in Subarnalata’s life. Plague had hit the city of Kolkata. Subarnalata fell ill and it was her illness that had brought her to Subala’s village. It is from then onwards we find certain changes start to take place in her life. On her brother-in-law Subodh’s behest, Subarna (Subarnalata) was taken to Subala. Prabodh wondered why she accepted his suggestion. On reaching there, Subarna was relaxed. The author remarks, Subarnalata was blissfully unaware of her husband’s feelings. She was spending her days in a different world [in the simple atmosphere of village Chapta in the house of Subala, her friend (p.109) and sister-in-law]—a world she had often dreamt of, but didn’t know could actually exist. In this world, people laughed, joked, and worked in harmony. No one tried to subdue or oppress. No one was under any pressure to prove their might. (Mazumdar 1997: 92)
We see that by balancing the demands of family and her right to respond to her own demands, Subarnalata like her mother tried hard to establish that a wife can become a subject that feels and acts; and that a woman’s position as a wife is not inferior to her position as a mother.\(^{39}\) She can be an agent of change—an agent that is not just an object, not just observed but observes herself as well as others. Thereby, she puts her claim simultaneously on the inner domain as well as on the outer domain. Subarnalata understood that the ‘inner domain’ cannot remain ‘secluded’ or restricted from communication with the ‘outside’ world. This was the unrestricted world of Subala and her family where the interweaving of the spaces—the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’—take place and where Subarnalata could express her joy and dismay. Her children also roamed everywhere with their cousins in the village ‘tasting complete freedom’ (Mazumdar 1997: 95). She could also express and share her thoughts for the country. Ashapurna observes, Subarnalata only heard the genuine feeling that had prompted the words,

\[
\text{[P]ull down those crumbling walls,}
\text{How long will they stand?}
\text{Raise your head, and show your spirit ...}
\text{This earth is yours as much as theirs .... (Mazumdar 1997: 97)}
\]

It is quite clear that Subarnalata’s mind was engaged with the need for freedom of the country. She identified her feelings with the words voiced through Ambika. But she is helpless. She is a married woman with small children. Besides that, society will have to approve of her movements outside the house. It is this ‘gendered segregation’, the ‘Wall’, or the \textit{Achalayatan}—the immovable edifice between the sexes—that Ashapurna suggests breaking, prominently and powerfully in the first two parts of her trilogy.

During the working time of the trilogy, many of her short stories, novels, and novellas were written. Yet, the trilogy gives scope to understand Ashapurna’s life and the way she perceived the condition of women and the changes that affected them in the context of middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalist struggle in India spread roughly over the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of twentieth century. In this regard it will be interesting to learn from the author about her conceptualization of the trilogy.
From my childhood days the question-ridden mind intrigued me with sharp protest against the prevalent divided social system. Why this separatism? Why is the system so unequal? Many such ‘why’s’ had distressed me. What disturbed me most was the condition of women/girls ... the deprivation of rights to everything. Why should their lives be spent in the darkness of hindrances? These questions never allowed me to relax and perhaps Pratham Pratisruti is the culmination of these questions. The protagonist of the novel can be called the symbol of protest—a girl who could break the ‘immovable edifice’ and wished to see women in their human dignity. (Devi 1978: 20)

Indeed, from the glimpses of Satyabati’s experience explored till now and the feminist questions of the absence of rights that Ashapurna says intrigued her from her childhood, we get to know at least partially why she did not attempt writing an autobiography. As she said ‘truth cannot be revealed in its entirety’. But, it is quite clear that through Satyabati’s experience, Ashapurna critiqued the deep chasm between masculine and feminine values, which definitely amounted to deprivation of rightful claims of women in society.

To overcome the system of separatism, according to Ashapurna, women will have to empower themselves. (p.111) Ashapurna was in search of human dignity, but, the ‘wall’ as she observes not only divided the relationship between nation and nation but was also the source of divided mentality which turned into hatred of men and women and men in society. Those who are aware of Tagore’s works will recall his concept about Achalayatan—breaking the geographical and temporal barriers and his caveat against ‘a strong suspicion of whatever is beyond the barriers we have built’, but as demonstrated, Ashapurna examines the barriers with much sharp arguments seeking answers to the ‘women’s question’.

As she questions the encouragement of passivity of feminine nature in the ideal of stability, women’s presence and voice which has been relegated as marginal are problematized. In her essay, ‘Society and the Role of Women’, for example, she observes:

As long as women are steady and vigilant, society is assured of stability .... The woman is the pillar of strength in every facet of life, be it domestic or social. They uphold and carefully nurture the age-old customs and tradition, faith, and values present in the conventional system, and carry forward the legacy of the past to the future generations.

As revealed, Ashapurna problematizes the discourse of Indian feminism as a gift from the earlier generations, which is not recorded in the pages of history.
Ashapurna’s version shares features of mythic image of Indian womanhood which indeed underwent mutations, and the ideals and inspirations drawn from the foremothers as well as traditional father figures. Her attempt to examine the autobiographical accounts of feminist history is also combined with the master-narrative of feminism in India ‘typically been traced back to the social reform movement of the nineteenth century’ (Chowdhury 2004: xxxii). Ashapurna acknowledged the reform measures as she said ‘or else, why Vidyasagar is called a pioneer’, although she differed in certain details (Devi 1997: (p.112) 16). She also acknowledged the works during the early days of national movement to ameliorate the wretched conditions of the Indian women by propelling them towards education or stree siksha. However, it is to be noted, in turn, the practice she employed to map feminist history—looking back at the times of authentic tradition and simultaneously looking ahead of the colonial times she lived in and its difficult transition to modernity—opens up to the innovative approach suggesting wide possibilities for further scrutiny. One important point is that she makes a clear distinction between orthodoxy that perpetuated brutal customs like child marriage and tradition as ‘a body of knowledge that provides instructions about ways of going about in the world’ (Chowdhury 2004: xxxiii). What I wish to suggest is that Ashapurna’s intimate understanding of the borderless aspects of her feminism is an expression of her experience at a practical level.
Ashapurna insisted that women should be ensured of the place of \textit{manush}, a human being, just as men were. By constantly emphasizing on the Bengali word ‘manush’ (which is not gendered), she also referred to the ‘males of our species’ who drive the modern civilization of power and starkly opposed the concept of using the female to embody the nation, which was eulogized by both the reformers and the nationalists. For Ashapurna, women cannot be considered as ‘nothing’ but body. Thereby, Ashapurna also examined the identification of social roles by gender which corresponds to ‘ghar’ and ‘bahir’—home and world (and simultaneously the material/spiritual dichotomy, which had acquired a very special significance in the nationalist mind). She revisited the oral life-story of Satyabati and her struggle to come outside the confines of the home and hearth from within the neglected domestic space of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Then she moved on to the age she witnessed—the next generation, retelling the story of Subarnalata, and describes it as a representation of the helpless ‘cry of an imprisoned soul’. (p.113) Ashapurna thereby proclaimed a legitimate place of a woman in society, neither as ‘devis’ nor as ‘dasis’, but a place of a human being having equal rights, both inside and outside. Satyabati and Subarnalata tried to show that path by exercising their volition. Satyabati was reminded by her son that she will not be free until the nation was free of the colonial rule, but she was committed to continuing her struggle overcoming hurdles at every step, although she felt defeated because she could not save her daughter from child marriage. Even then, Subarnalata took upon herself the onus of carrying out the unfinished work of her mother. For Bakul and Parul, Subarnalata’s daughters, the roads were cleared towards emancipation. Bakul will recollect and write her mother’s and grandmother’s life stories. It is from Bakul’s diary we come to know about their struggle and the strong assertion: ‘As if girls are unnatural and not conceived in their mother’s wombs! Do you think girls just come floating with the tide ..?’ (Devi 1974: 25).

We are told that Satyabati started her long journey towards women’s emancipation by defending the right to education and challenging the notion of poetry as an act of blasphemy, but she could not devote time to write a life-story. Satyabati refused to play with dolls in her early childhood and tried her hands on pen and paper; she returned to her in-laws willingly as a child bride to resist Nabakumar from having a second wife; she broke away from the joint family and journeyed to the city of Calcutta from the village mainly for her children’s education and subsequently took several steps to help adult women recover from an immolated psychological state.
Subarnalata, in spite of her far more complicated struggle than her mother’s, wrote poetry and also filled up pages of her diary writing about her mother’s unfulfilled wishes. She also wrote about her self-struggle, which was intertwined with her wish to participate in the larger struggle for the country’s independence, but burned it feeling utterly dejected by her son’s ignorance to understand the ‘content of her thought’. Bakul, although has earned quite a name as a young accomplished author, does not attribute much significance to herself because she understood that the efforts of the parents and grandparents had helped the girls of her generation to have a secure position. Moreover, she could not forget all the humiliation that her mother endured for that, and ultimately writes a collective experience of the three generations.

The colonial past, therefore, informs Bakul’s diary of the post-colonial present. The event of Satyabati breaking the shackles of domesticity, which withheld women from participating outside, in the nineteenth century, is the ‘originary’ moment from where Bakul starts tracking the story of the negotiation and opposition of her grandmother. She continues telling the story to the post-colonial present through a deep understanding of her mother’s struggle. In fact, Ashapurna Devi’s deeply thought-out narrative structure to portray the invisibility of women and their process of formation as subjects of their own discourses and the journey they took for that from the inner quarters of daily grind and biological reproduction to the ‘outside world’ (which was an exclusive preserve of man), is a matter of constant investigation. Ashapurna’s narrative demonstrates that both the mother and the daughter took painstaking effort to engage with and to maintain the responsibility they promised to themselves as subjects, and that they are effective to a great extent in changing their own lives and society.

V
It needs to be noticed here that although Ashapurna detested the prevalent prejudiced concept of mother as goddess and the wife as only second to her, and that indeed there were harsh insensitive people like Muktokeshi and the mother-worshipping son Prabodh, her observation did not fail to notice that there were thoughtful and sensible persons like Subala, Amulya, and his mother. They were affectionate, sympathetic, and caring in general. Especially the care and warmth of Subala and her mother-in-law enabled Subarnalata to recover from the miserable emotional and physical state. They understood Subarna’s ‘pain’ and their doors were open for her in their small village house in Chapta. Subala’s husband, Amulya, also had no objection to that. They were all nationalist-minded and all fought for the country’s independence in their own small ways. It may not be out of place to note that it is from this interior village in Bengal that the caste system had also started to erode. Also, all the daughters went to school. Of course the person behind bringing the changes in the ‘basic values’ was Ambika (Subala’s cousin by marriage/brother-in-law). Subarna’s goals were similar to Ambika’s. ‘Subarna’s face registered interest’, ‘Prabodh’s grew longer’, observed Ashapurna (Mazumdar 1997: 86).
Through Subarnalata’s experience, as noted, Ashapurna also suggests an insightful exploration of the conditions of human rights. An intelligent wife like Subarnalata can challenge the dominant ideas of chastity and the ensuing victimization of women to ‘domestic’ life. Subarnalata was indeed caught between suspicion and trust, which were constantly mediated not only by her husband but also mother-in-law, yet, she did not stop to respond to ‘the public world’. Of course, things had started to change in her life. One important change Subarna noticed was that her three younger children Parul, Bakul (daughters), and Subal (son) were different from their elder siblings. They were conscious of their self-esteem. They were as well sensitive of others’ needs. Unlike Bakul, while Parul could not ‘see herself as insignificant’, the latter’s self-realization facilitated her to understand the pain of her mother’s insignificant position (Mazumdar 1997: 186). We see that the right of a woman to have a position of her own in family and in society, and the need for the fulfilment of the spirit and mind is getting simultaneously (p.116) carried across generations—from Satyabati to Subarnalata to Parul. Later when Ambika visited their Calcutta house and was not allowed to come in, Parul reacted that her mother should have a say in who comes into it and who does not. She was the ‘mistress’ of the house. (Does not the old education say, hospitality cannot be denied even to a stranger?) Earlier to this inhospitable incident, Subarna overlooking Prabodh’s conservatism had allowed Parul to go out with their neighbour’s son. She did not believe that going out with a boy would threaten her daughter’s ‘femininity’. However, according to Prabodh she is a nubile young woman and that was a grave mistake on Subarna’s part (Mazumdar 1997: 118). A point to be noticed here is that without suppressing the various negotiations and oppositions of spaces (between tradition and modernity, even tradition and orthodoxy—inside and outside, for example) in a woman’s life and indeed without suppressing her marginalization spread across generations, Ashapurna neatly draws the mother–daughter continuum towards progress.

However, it must be mentioned that ‘to depict this curve of a changing society’, as Ashapurna puts it, she did not try to conquer the place of men but searched for the independent identity of the ‘woman’, never misusing the freedom of expression. Commenting on the language—the tool through which literature depicts society, she said,

Certainly, it is by all means true that whatever is there or does exist in life, all of that may be reflected in realistic literature. Literature is nothing but a reflection of life. Still, in my own perception—in many instances, life is very brazenly naked. In such situations, even if it is allowed to present itself fittingly in the court of literature, it has to have a covering. And that veil or covering is decency. To be able to express everything in decent language is also a fine art.
Is there anything more real than human body? Even then, is it necessary to present it in its naked form when displaying it in the public eye? It is uneasy to say so much about myself; still, when the \( \text{(p.117)} \) responsibility has landed on my shoulder, I must say—indecency troubles my mind and in no circumstances am I inclined to allow it entry into my mind. I have abided by this principle in my long literary life, but have never felt any difficulty because of that. I feel blessed that the reader community has accepted me and have surely not discarded my thoughts on literature by calling me ‘artificial’ or ‘back-dated’. I am extremely grateful to all my readers. (Devi 1978: 18–19)

Discursive writings on women’s aspirations and deprivations in a traditional society are not unknown. But the simultaneity of the ‘silent resistance’ and the dexterous handling of language, display a unique quality of Ashapurna Devi’s representations of women, which are at the same time real. They are strong and sensitive but never offensive. While the lack of alertness towards the problems of invisibility is uncovered, human frailties and vulnerabilities are problematized. Women’s role in their family and society at large should be open to ‘choice in having freedom’ and ‘exercising freedom’. For that matter, none, men or women, can be taken for granted to do wonders in an oppressive atmosphere.

VI

Ashapurna was more than aware of the problems of the highly fractured times in which she lived and the tensions of gender-sexuality dynamics operational in the early twentieth-century British India. The negotiation and opposition of spaces that took place in the life of Indian women, which in turn prevented them from progress as well as provided a platform for dynamism, were therefore important to her.\(^{40}\) She never removed herself from the original historical context of the anti-colonial struggle and took the difficult middle path between tradition and orthodoxy or even tradition and modernity to describe the distinctive role men and women played in the formation of Indian society. \( \text{(p.118)} \) Her approach was that of ‘back to the future’—not to rigid cultural constraints, but to local, progressive education that would attend to the needs of the time, and renewed culture and creativity that would be practicable to the need of the situation.
In this regard, Ashapurna’s recollections about her mother will be of interest. For Saralasundari, a dialogue with certain aspects of past tradition which are oriented towards the future needed to be explored within new ways of understanding it. She understood education for women as a ‘necessity’ and not a ‘luxury’. Considering the time during which Saralasundari lived, the response towards religion was politically directed to a certain extent. The retrogressive effects resulted in orthodoxy and thereby marginalized women. Saralasundari went against the contemporary wave and vigorously promoted women’s liberation. She had a thorough knowledge about the past and was well informed about the colonial present.

Saralasundari, as Ashapurna says in various places, was a nationalist. Therefore nation-building, which was her primary objective (in whatever small ways possible), would not be attained to a desired level if half of the mass were deprived of education and were not able to think freely. Rather to take a way beyond the cultural conflict that emerged out of the colonizer–colonized relationship was important for her. Neither a self-centred and materialistic individualism (which was not a facet of the traditional social system) nor the spiritual (orthodox) aspirations of the patriarchs, like deifying a piece of land as Mother Goddess which defined the concept of the nation in combination with the worshipping of mother as goddess, could be a solution to women’s problem and the society at large. They are sheer exclusionary processes. A parallel force of educated women as it existed in the ancient times was important. For that, access to literatures was essential. Education of women then, as far as middle class families were concerned, was limited to producing good homemakers (p. 119) and maintaining an orthodox ideology. Saralasundari did not totally believe in any of them. Imparting of ‘new’ domestic skills or making women aware of the need of new etiquettes (as it happened in the urban areas), was not enough. A focus on development inclusive of the old and the new education was crucial for her. She loved her country and to overcome the colonial situation her suggestion was towards a dynamic promotion of stree siksha (women’s education) which would lead to stree swadhinata (women’s independence) (Devi 1997: 59).

We see a significant similarity between Saralasundari and Subarnalata regarding women’s emancipation. A point to be noted is, although Saralasundari and Harendranath differed in certain aspects, they were good companions to each other as far as work was concerned. Subarnalata could not have a friendly relationship with Prabodh. Rather with a nationalist frame of mind Subarnalata was friendlier with Subala than Prabodh was to his sister. While Subarnalata maintained her friendship with Subala until the tragic death of the former separated both of them, Prabodh avoided her sister. Subala also received every appreciation from Subarnalata regarding her concern for women’s upliftment. At the same time, Subala too did not miss the inner turmoil of Subarnalata as much as she had feelings for every human being.
Subala’s mother-in-law, Phuleswari, belonged to the school of old education and was an equally understanding woman. She was loving, helpful, and open-minded and supported Subala in whatever way she could without much interference. She was more kind to her than her own mother. Subarnalata was most welcome in their small village house, as mentioned, even when she was unwell. Phuleswari and her family represent what Ashapurna describes as ‘sree’—the essence of Indian spiritual existence which facilitated the family and the society to sustain a semblance of ‘stability’ (1962).

(p.120) That does not necessarily come with material wealth. Subarnalata’s family was much more affluent than Subala’s. But the latter’s world was ‘full of light and joy’. Subarnalata cherished their family atmosphere, the husband-wife compatibility and their warm relationship with their mother. Yet, she could not spend her time happily. Ignorance could not be bliss for her; it was the real enemy. The reason behind all ignorance is an erroneous process of socialization.

Subarnalata (like Saralasundari) read newspapers and was aware of the ravaged condition of Bengal. Ashapurna observes, ‘Subarna finally found her voice’ (Mazumdar 1997: 85). For her the print media might have created a bridge between the public and the private, which had also initially offered women a wide communicative space inside their house, but there was a need for girls to go outside. Freedom of thinking, an important aspect of nationalist discourse, can only develop with exposure to outside. For that schooling was important. Thus, Parul should go to school, although she was beyond the school-going age. Subarnalata’s encouragement failed in this regard. Her encouragement rather found a space in Subala’s house. Amulya, Subala’s husband, taught in a ‘school for girls’ in the village. The school was the brainchild of Ambika, Subala’s brother-in-law. He also wrote patriotic poetry and dedicated himself to the nationalist movement. The school was a part of the movement. ‘This was not the time to look back’ and village reconstruction had to start (Mazumdar 1997: 114). He went around asking everyone in the village to send their girls to school. Subarnalata wished to participate in the movement herself and said,

‘You mean,’ she said slowly [to Ambika], ‘I am automatically disqualified just because I have a husband who doesn’t agree with me and small children who need their mother?’

Ambika laughed, ‘No, no, we wouldn’t disqualify you ... there is more than one way of fighting this battle .... There is such a lot you could do ....’

(p.121) ‘Like what?’
‘Educate others. Our biggest drawback is ignorance ... you can spread that awareness .... Women have the same intelligence as men .... For thousands of years, they have been discouraged from using it, from thinking for themselves. It is time things changed, time they woke up to themselves. Yes, I know it won’t be easy. But someone has to make a beginning, surely?’

‘That is what my mother used to say’, Subarna said softly. (Mazumdar 1997: 93)

As revealed, with a blend of sympathy and irony, Ashapurna demonstrates that not only were the roles, obligation, and biases inherent in the system. She also draws attention to the fact that constructive thoughts and efforts of a few men like the nationalist Ambika had a positive influence on middle class conventional values. Ambika’s liberal mindset (almost like Bhabotosh Biswas in Pratham Pratisruti) encouraged women’s education and his encouragement also continued to have its influence on the life of a woman like Subarnalata for whom the problems of the home/country and personal/familial problems were intricately linked. She also had an analysis of women’s inequality residing in the patriarchal organization of the family. With great precision, Ashapurna highlights that every small aspect of a woman’s life needed the sanction of the husband and his family. Her liberty to express feelings for the country, leave alone having a choice in participating outside, and not to mention the deprivation of small equalities, all were curbed by their will. But, with a sophisticated handling of language, Ashapurna equally displayed the extraordinary competence of her pen to capture the complexities of feminist questions in the Indian context in Bengal in the colonial era, as exemplified above.

Subarnalata was definitely marginalized and the extracts above are self-explanatory. Moreover, she suffered impediments at every occasion—starting from her demands for new and fresh (p.122) linen for women at labour and for their newborns, to having an open space (like the south facing balcony in her house) to communicate with the world, and to reading books and travelling. Nevertheless, Muktokeshi admitted that Subarnalata,

had introduced many new things .... She bought a newspaper every day, she made sure all the children— including girls— learnt to read; above all, at the time of childbirth, she had started to produce clean sheets and towels, not just for herself but for all her other sister-in-law as well .... There were many other ‘modern’ ideas in her mind .... Subarna crashed through every barrier, and always got what she wanted .... Well, almost always. (Mazumdar 1997: 38)
Subarnalata indeed broke certain rules which were ‘senseless’ and were not of common good for women. According to Ashapurna, a motivated woman like Subarnalata was a ‘misfit’ in the world—the world of ‘mindless convention’ that surrounded her. But much like her mother, Subarnalata remained uncompromised till the end. Her undogmatic defence of the value of education and ‘protest against some injustices prevalent in the society’ (like child marriage, inequality of sexes, caste difference) till the end exemplifies the same. They also underline the value of dignity in a woman’s life (which could only come with awareness to their well being, their health problems, need for education) in middle-class families which had already started to change.

It is noted that without underestimating the fabric of aggrandizement or overlooking the pitfalls in the social system, Ashapurna stitched together the manifestations of marginalization and a sense of empowerment in Subarnalata’s experience. Subarnalata, in fact, is able to keep at least ‘one promise’—a promise she had made to herself as a young wife. She now has a ‘new house’ according to her own specification and this house also has a long veranda facing the south—a space to watch the open sky. She left back all the furniture in the room of the old house, but the room is left unlocked. The ‘new house’ is tidy and compact. She also finds time to ‘fill dozens of notebooks’, (p.123) although Muktokeshi warned her about the chores she will have to do, all by herself, which were shared in the joint family. Ashapurna seems to put another feminist question at the end—who could give her a sense of direction? Subarnalata’s was surely an individual effort—almost in every picture from the past, she saw herself fighting, either for or against something (Mazumdar 1997: 185), but she will not forget her mother who educated her before she was secretly married off at the age of nine. Moreover, Satyabati’s epistolary advice to her daughter’s letter—‘No task can be completed unless one is willing to move with care and with endless patience’—was inscribed in Subarnalata’s mind. She was hopeful, that with time, men will learn this important lesson. ‘But that is not all’. Women too have to learn their lessons. If a change has to be brought about, women themselves have to make an effort to overcome the patriarchal culture that has created a gulf (the ‘achalayatan’) between the sexes.
Till the end of the novel, whether Prabodh and her (Subarnalata’s) elderly sons learned a lesson was questioned. Subarnalata, even while on her death bed could not stop from thinking about her youngest daughter Bakul’s studies. She asked, ‘What happened to your tutor? Did they get rid of him?’ (Mazumdar 1997: 200). Now (since Parul was married), all her hopes resided in Bakul. But, the daughter knew her mother’s death meant ‘an end to her own studies, finishing school and trying for a scholarship’ (Mazumdar 1997: 200). Indeed, the mindset of the conservative fathers and mothers has to change. It will take some time. We are told that a few women and men who thought differently worked patiently through the ages. Subarnalata is one of them. As an agent of change Subarnalata rejects and tries to modify a patriarchal system as much as she could, which had already been internalized both by men and women. Her struggle was much more profound than that of other women of her time. She was not only anxious about the improvement of her own situation or her immediate family, but also that of others. She knew that India needed educated women and so she insisted that her husband bring Subala from her village. She was determined to see Subala who understood her. Subala too understood that all routes of developing herself were blocked for Subarnalata because she was a woman (Mazumdar 1997: 147). Subarnalata was too ill and thus she insisted that Subala visit her. The latter ‘had started to marry her daughters off to just anyone ...without worrying about their caste’ because all that mattered was ‘the girls were very happy’ (Mazumdar 1997: 201–2). Without sensationalizing the end Ashapurna established that Subarnalata did not give in to her husband’s emotions and that marrying in a different caste cannot be a taboo.
It is true that Subarnalata’s life was full of dissatisfaction, but she left back hope which was brought to her by Subala. The orthodoxy or the rigidity of the traditional moulds which withheld India from improvement for long started to dissolve. Of course it need not be rehearsed that changes started to take place with Satyabati’s aspirations to rework the orthodox beliefs, the blind cruelty, and impracticality of such customs, and the derogatory logic behind the caste system. For that, she took the difficult path of stepping out of the village and settling down in Calcutta. With the progression of time as the nationalist consciousness reconstructed the spiritual culture of India, changes also started to take place in villages. An important change was that women’s freedom of movement was legalized. They were free to move outside the house as long as it did not threaten their femininity. The caste system, which various studies show is an effect of the long standing foreign rule in India, also started to wear down and in this regard changes started to take place with the initiative of women. Subala’s daughters were free to move about in the non-Brahmin locality and also got married to a different caste. Subala reminded her brother that they were married in (p.125) a different caste, not a lower caste. On the other hand we find Ambika’s and his cousin Amulya’s education taught them that, in spite of its limitations, ‘tradition was a body of knowledge’ and they along with Phuleswari encouraged Subala in all her endeavours. Subarnalata’s short stay in their village house also helped her to continue with her vision of education.

Subarnalata–Subala relationship establishes that sisterly affection can educate the society. Subala–Amulya relationship shows the possibility for happy companionship in marriage. Of course, Subarnalata’s indefatigable spirit ultimately had to accept defeat. In a conservative patriarchal milieu, Subarnalata’s independent and refined thoughts about selfhood and freedom could not have received appreciation. Subarnalata dies a tragic death but her thoughts about women’s lives live on through Bakul, and those thoughts could not be silenced. Bakul writes a sensitive collective history of her grandmother and her mother. She is more than seventeen years old and could take her decision to remain as a spinster. Also, ‘the century-old rural or walled urban society is no longer there. Therefore, those problems no longer exist. That helpless state of the lives of girls/women has ended with the close of an era. Those who have come out from behind the iron curtain are flying the banner of success everywhere.’ Yet, Ashapurna ponders:

Have the problems of women really been solved? Has their situation truly improved? Are not the birds who have come out of the cages tossing about with anxiety trapped in the net of an all-devouring hunter? That hunter is called modernity. It is not only girls/women, but also the society, literature, art, and civilisation, which are all tossing about trapped in its glowing, colourfully wrapped net’. (1976: 12)
Ashapurna revisits the difficult question of negotiation and opposition of spaces between tradition and modernity through Bakul (although the role of Bakul in Bakulkatha is that of a chronicler, not of a heroine). In doing so, she keeps her ideas on (p.126) the discourse on Indian feminism as an open-ended proposition. Ashapurna did not reject modernity but declined from supporting men’s addiction to it.

In terms of literary achievement, Ashapurna herself said, ‘the portrait of the three female characters drawn in the backdrop of three ages is the prime harvest of my literary life.’ The trilogy has indeed brought her immense popularity and readers have been able to identify their deprivation and futility in life with that of the characters; many of them were overwhelmed with emotions, ‘How did she come to know about my experiences?’ (Devi 1976: 11–12)

She said,

In this long life of mine perhaps there has been disappointment about this world and has perhaps come out in my literary works; but that does not mean that I consider this picture of erosion as the last word of my life. I know, as there is dissatisfaction, there is satisfaction as well...The world is inexhaustibly vivacious; it is waiting with its endless stock of love for everyone. The love that says, ‘no one is trivial, no one is worthless, no one is irrelevant’ ....The goal of literature, to me is to carry that heartening message of hope. (Devi 1978: 21)

I wish to suggest that, imparting a sense of hope continued to be the basis of Ashapurna’s feminist insight and her thoughts on literature. Of course, to resist the violence of gender injustice as well as social injustice continued to be her objectives. Her works demonstrate an original enquiry into the nature of personal, colonial, postcolonial, and post postcolonial identity, which would contribute towards the study of the future feminist activities. Moreover, the connection of the many determining ideologies like nationalism, colonialism/imperialism, gender binarism, which determines her work opens a way to the rich complexity of the interactions between, and among those once seemingly cohesive constructs. Ashapurna’s extraordinary agency as a writer enabled her to strategically emphasize and minimize (p.127) certain dimensions of her subjectivity for specific political, religious, or social purposes. Accommodating strategically and privileging her subjectivity, she steers the project of restoration of women’s status and human relationships in society with an emphasis on the word ‘manush’ which is not gendered.
Thus the task of analysing her life and works needs to be approached simultaneously as an aesthetic and as a political one. Much more work certainly needs to be done. At the same time, if we are to examine her life and work critically, as Ashapurna herself has noted, we must be prepared to absorb a considerable list of deep-seated contradictions. Ashapurna was essentially traditional, and she never ignored the role of tradition in women’s lives; at the same time she was emphatic that a woman in her selfless endeavour should not forget to keep something to fill her own vessel. It is through the self-expression of Satyabati, Subarnalata, and Bakul that she demonstrates a new consciousness in the annals of feminist writings in India. The underlying thread which highlights Ashapurna’s feminist insights and a solution to the women’s question can only be summarized in her own words: ‘Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency ... the strength to tear apart the veil of false consciousness and to stand out in the splendour of one’s dignity’ (1989).

To maintain dignity or self-respect just as women will have to attend the question of choice in exercising freedom towards attaining self-sufficiency with alertness, men too must motivate themselves towards overcoming the incongruities in hegemonic culture and understanding the dignity of choice and the capacity of rational thinking in women.

Notes

(1.) Ashapurna visited her maternal uncles quite frequently before her marriage, which had a significant influence on her. The maternal uncles, Amritalal Roy and Chunilal Roy, were known for their social standing. Amritalal was the editor of the newspaper Tribune in Lahore; Chunilal was a district magistrate in colonial Bengal (as stated by Nupur Gupta, Ashapurna Devi’s only daughter-in-law). It may be noted that in spite of the restrictions in the conservative family, Ashapurna was privileged to have liberal parents as well as maternal uncles.

(2.) They were nine brothers and sisters. Including Ashapurna Devi, the names are chronologically listed: Snehalata, Birendranath, Dhirendranath, Ratnamala, Ashapurna, Sampurna, Hirendranath, Satyendranath, and Lekha (Source: Nupur Gupta). For further references, see ‘My Childhood Days’ in Devi (1997: 32).

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Silence and Its Contours


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