Abstract and Keywords

This chapter displays the complexities of the intriguing combination of culture-gender: the other side of love. Besides, the conversations with the luminaries and readers highlight Ashapurna’s contribution to Indian feminism, which also leaves adequate scope to the readers to think about her feminist insights beyond the ownership of ideas on equality, rights, and justice, and which certainly extends beyond the limits of the self and the other. At the same time, the language that evolves from the conversations brings forth meaningful yet uninterrupted reality at an organic level, when the barrier between the self and the other becomes intense and the ‘truth’ gets revealed. Indeed, unpretentious of her emotions or the prescriptive social regulations, the conversations underline Ashapurna’s candid responses to the ambivalent relation between a woman’s creativity and compulsory domesticity in her life. Yet, she maintains there is a difference between ‘ours’ and the present age.

Keywords: contemporary women, contemporary society, education, equal rights, home, invisible, love, patriarchal society, personal, world

Conversations with Ashapurna Devi

They Do Not Want to Acknowledge Talent in Women*

Ashapurna Devi in Conversation with Subhadra Urmila Majumdar
Another honour for Ashapurna Devi: recently Rabindra Bharati University has bestowed upon her a D.Litt. Although she was caught between the orthodoxy of a middle-class Bengali family that did not permit her to go to school and the confines of the four walls of the household, her strong motivation enabled her to overcome circumstantial difficulties. Her literary genius flourished and eventually she has come to be hailed as a major writer of twentieth century Bengali literature. She is thoroughly modern in thought and perception ... her lively mind still fresh and spirited.

(p.250)

SUBHADRA URMILA MAJUMDAR (SUM):

Asha di, the grief and misery of women have priority in your writings. Why?
ASHAPURNA DEVI (AD):

Look, I have never thought on those lines that I shall be writing particularly about the pain and misery of women. But from my childhood, I have witnessed discriminations that women suffered in our conservative society. Personally, I could not go to a basic school because of family conservatism. This irked me very much and raised questions in my mind—why? Why is it so? These questions emerged as a form of protest and my heroines are personifications of that rebellious spirit. Their protests are against the indignity, neglect, and disrespect that they suffered. Don’t call it grief. Grief is a different thing.

SUM:

You have voiced your protest in many of your writings. Are these a general remark about all women in the then society, or it is a close observation of the sufferings of any particular woman? Do you think that these abject conditions of women prevail even today?
AD:

I have observed society in general. There is a heaven and hell difference between our childhood and the present age. Girls did not enjoy any rights then. They could not solicit legal support. Yet, they took risks and proved their aptitude and capability in every sphere of work. In those days, the only duty relegated to women was to grace the household akin to Goddess Lakshmi, and remain a diffident and self-effacing wife. Keeping everybody pleased was the one-point agenda. Women today are involved in many different activities. They cannot afford to stick to a single ‘role’—they must assume many roles. Undoubtedly, this has caused tremendous increase in responsibility. But you know, ‘freedom’ defines life in a different way, and surely this has showed them a way out of their confinement within the house. I consider the liberty that women have got so far to be a positive step. Our days were just the opposite; women were forced to remain captive and this prejudice has always pained me, and I wanted to find out the reason for that difference. Why should they be deprived of air and light in this realm of God?

SUM:
What is your view on the problems of women in the present day?
AD:

How much of the problems of modern women can I see sitting at home? I am not too sure about the extent of their problems, but I can feel it. If one has to state generally, I would say that women still feel neglected, and they grieve that this male dominated society is still rooted very firmly in its position.
SUM:

Are you saying that they do not protest?
AD:

Of course, they do voice their protest. But, what can they attain by protesting against such a powerful regime?
SUM:

Is there no way out?
AD:

It is a fact that they have come out to a great extent. They have come out from a monstrous cage. Nevertheless, beyond the current position, what is required is mental liberation. Girls can reach the pinnacle of success on their own merit. But, their mind lurks somewhere behind. The fact remains that there are no means for them to change this male-governed society. So they are to discover their ways to fame and achievement. Let them think how they can build a new social order maintaining their self-esteem—where equal rights govern the society for both men and women, not a society ruled by men alone. In merit, education, and intelligence girls of today do not fall short of anything. So it is best that they are allowed to solve their own problems. But, it is also a matter of conjecture whether the much sought-after liberation must be at the cost of the desirable (p.252) image of the eternal woman. Men and women are breaking the fetters of society, constructed over thousands of years. However, I would say from the viewpoint of our childhood, that the situation has become much more advantageous for the present-day women.
SUM:

Have you written anything about this?
AD:

Not any magnum opus. However, I keep on writing in newspapers, journals, and magazines.
SUM:

To what extent are the problems of women getting importance in modern Bengali literature?
AD:

These days nothing worth mentioning is being written on women’s problems. It appears as if men are facing all the problems nowadays—the majority of literature is based on problems of unemployed men.
Is there any remedy for that?

Remedy? Is there any way to stop the waves of the ocean? What remedy will you suggest, for whom? Leave that aside. Let the people concerned take up the remedial measures. That is not the job of a litterateur. Their job is to put their thoughts into words—to convey the indistinct groans of human beings who are torn at every step by the unrealized desires and are worn away by adverse situations. There is satisfaction in being able to express oneself properly, to express the ailing cry of those ordinary human beings which is always deemed unimportant; otherwise, one feels an agony. It is not right that litterateurs have to bear the responsibility of the entire universe.

Their problems get greater importance if modern women write about them. But, they are not writing.

It is important to think about the extent to which the workload of modern women has increased. (p.253)

Are they not writing because of that?

Of course. Where do they get the time? They are managing both home and work outdoors. She can think profoundly only if she gets time. But, is she getting enough time for that?

How did you manage to make time?

We lived a domestic life, did not venture out to earn money. Of course, I managed to earn some, sitting at home (laughs) but, for that, I did not have to go out. I wrote whenever I got spare time—even stayed awake at night to write. I was not old then and my eyesight had not weakened. You know, this actually is no matter at all. One can adjust oneself to the situation if he/she so desires. Some people say they do not get time to read books, while many others do so under similar circumstances.

It is known to everybody that you are an avid reader. Who is your favourite author?

(p.253)
First, I would say Rabindranath. He is, one may say, as revered as our God (Jibandebata). I am also a profound admirer of Bankimchandra. I always felt like rereading his entire book even after reading it a 100 times. It is same with Saratbabu in many instances, even though not always. All the authors who are my predecessors have written well. I loved to read all of them, as reading is my passion. That includes books of women writers as well like Anurupa Devi, Nirupama Devi, Indira Devi, and Sailabala Ghoshjaya. They wrote so beautifully, but no one recalls their names now. After all, they are women. This is the fault of male-dominated society. No one wants to acknowledge the talents of women in any way. They admire the beauty of women; they also acknowledge the mundane merits of women very much but not their talent.

SUM:

You have been an achiever in a male-dominated society. Any sense of pride in that? (p.254)
AD:

No! Not at all. What have I achieved? I don’t want to take the credit myself; it is as if someone else makes me write—some invisible power. As I have already said, I did not ever go to school. But who made me write those thousands of pages? It must have been some celestial power. The poet laureate Rabindranath also said so. I would say, in every writer or in every artist, an inspiration of this kind surely works. I call it an invisible power; others would say it is an inspiration.

SUM:

But has any person inspired you?
AD:

Person? Look, we lived a life of incarceration in our childhood. We did not have a chance to see or interact with any public person. Whom did we see? Uncles and aunts, paternal or maternal, all were very ordinary people, with both good and bad qualities. Can one get inspiration in her literary life from them? No, I did not. Literary inspirations come from literature itself. That is my impression. When you read a lot, you get a simultaneous desire to write as well.

SUM:

Which type of writing has given you the most satisfaction?
AD:

Look, if I ever had maximum satisfaction, it has come from writing short stories. I still like the short stories that I had written in my initial years. It makes me think—how had I written this—I used to write quite well!

SUM:

You also write for children. Which one do you like more?
AD:
I have a penchant for writing for children. When I write for adults, I feel as if I am doing some work; but when I write for children, I enjoy myself and feel relaxed. There is fun; there is a spirit in that. Combining the earthly and supernatural, there is a freedom to do whatever you like. I have always loved to write stories for children. My literary life had started with children; and I still wish to remain with them.

Note

(p.255) Hope of Bengali Literature: Ashapurna Devi†
Ashapurna Devi in Conversation with Partha Chatterjee

Prologue
Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since I first met Ashapurna Devi at her then residence—the Government Housing Estate, Gariahat. It was a time when the authors of Bangla (Bengali) literature, who are established now, were still struggling for recognition. Prose was yet unexplored by many of them. Many authors who had effectively influenced the society are no more, while those alive are treated with dereliction. Amidst such vicissitudes of authorial fame, Ashapurna Devi catered equally to the interests of all ages, with her coherent, simple, and attractive style of writing.

Although an octogenarian, she continued to write copiously with great profundity to keep up with both the demands of the publishers and the hope of readers. There is hardly any other author in contemporary Bangla literature and that too in Indian literature, who has made an irrefutable place for oneself writing continuously for 67 years. She has already written 300 books. Besides, many of her published works in various magazines, if collected together, would add up to thirty more books to her credit. If she can continue to write for some ten years more then she would earn a place for herself as the only living female author in the world to exceed Agatha Christie’s record. (p.256)
Ashapurna Devi is a gifted writer—she needed no particular time or environment to write. Her spontaneity in writing is analogous to a fish drinking water. Just as it is impossible to detect a fish from drinking water, it is not feasible for her closest ones to pin point the exact time when Ashapurna managed to write such a huge number with such variety. This is perhaps because all through her life she has carried out her respective duty as a wife and a mother efficiently. However, in search of her subject-matter Ashapurna did not wander into the wilderness or live a Bohemian life like Sarat Chandra or Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyay. Neither did she experience the life of a prisoner like Jarasandho, nor a life of a lawyer like, Achintya Kumar Sengupta. Unlike Narayan Gangopadhyay, Budhadev Basu or Pramathanath Bisi, Ashapurna Devi did not even have the experience of a teacher; leave alone the opportunity of becoming an ICS like Annadashankar Ray. In fact, she never went to school. Nonetheless, such a career is itself a record when compared to others. If we judge and compare her academic graph with some stalwarts of Bangla literature, we will see that even Rabindranath had studied in school for some days, attended classes in England as well. Sarat Chandra was an F.A. in his times, Samaresh Basu had studied up to the eighth standard, but Ashapurna Devi had never attended school for a single day. Not only this, she was deprived of receiving even minimal education at home, as she was a girl. Amidst such stereotyped codes which were imposed on her feminine existence, whatever she has achieved owes much to her unyielding endeavour and her struggle to continue with firm conviction. Yet, that was restricted only towards developing vernacular literature.

Still, Ashapurna never lamented. She neither nurtured any yearning in her personal life nor in her literary life, as she was taught that whatever little one received was a divine gift. Being born into an orthodox Indian family she experienced the (p.257) extremes of irrevocable impositions thwarting the women folk and realized the fact that submission to prescribed values and codes of subservience to domestic rules was the only choice to an approved existence. Ashapurna sustained conformity and remained satisfied with whatever came her way; whatever little she received, she accepted as a divine gift. In her childhood days, she had once sent her writing to a magazine without her parents’ knowledge. To her surprise it was acknowledged and that was the only time she had sent a manuscript on her own. Henceforth, publishers came to her with their endless requests and she tried to fulfil their demands to the best of her ability.

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

Yet in lieu of her infinite familial commitments do we ever find Ashapurna Devi asking time off to write? Ashapurna never experienced uninterrupted leisure—a time that she could call her own. It was like being trapped in a wheel whirling endlessly. Sushanta Babu (Ashapurna Devi’s son) says, ‘My mother had no specific time for writing, she wrote whenever she found time, even while cooking.’ To this Ashapurna added modestly: ‘Every week a reporter from the Bangla daily Bartaman comes to collect my writing and most of the time I have to rush to the other room keeping him waiting for an hour or two to have it completed.’ Even then, her writings did not suffer in variety, nor did they lack in standard. Rather, with age her pen became mightier than the sword—her creation became more powerful, unlike many others.

When I met her for the first time almost 26 years ago I was mesmerized by her appearance. She was clad in a red bordered sari with which she covered her head partially, looking brilliant with radiant vermillion shining on her forehead. In her motherly grace she almost paralleled a lively portrait by Jamini Roy with all its charm, poise, elegance, and suppleness. Her charismatic appearance had an extraordinary bearing on her behaviour, which was a wonderful combination of humbleness and vivacity, yet, equally intelligent in her psyche.

The Ashapurna of today is not the same that I had seen before. Her voice, smile, and her ardent optimism in life remain unaltered, but the ravages of time have affected her physique. A river finally completes its journey on meeting the ocean, yet it retains its identity. Similarly, today in the vast canvas of literature, Ashapurna Devi, in her journey to the public, has efficiently worked out the diabolically ambivalent relation between women’s creativity and compulsory domesticity in her life, and has shown how the silenced domestic zone has made its way into the first half of the twentieth century.

PARTHA CHATTERJEE (PC):

Greetings. My first question: When did you first start to write?

ASHAPURNA DEVI (AD):

Oh! That was a long time ago. I first wrote when I was 13 years old. It was first printed in Shishusathi.
A poem or prose? (p.259)

A poem. I had sent the poem without telling anyone at home. The letter of acceptance came from Rajkumar Chakraborty, the then in-charge of the contributors’ writing section—‘it will come out in next month’s issue’. He was my early encouragement. He repeatedly advised me, ‘Do not give up writing. Write stories as well.’ Moreover, it was he who had influenced me at that age to shift from poems and start writing stories.

Where were you staying then?

Near the Upper Circular Road and Gray Street crossing.

What did your father do?

My father Harendranath Gupta was an artist. His drawings used to come out in papers like *Manashi, Marmabani, Bharatbarsha*. Mainly, he used to draw portraits.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

We were eight of us. I was the fourth. My elder sister died when I was 12. There were two elder brothers and one sister before me.

Did you grow up in a joint family?

Yes, till I was six, we were in an extended joint family. Later my father had built a house at 157/1 Upper Circular Road and we moved there. Nevertheless, with eight of us, it was almost like a joint family; moreover, my grandmother continued exercising her steady control over us.

In which school did you study?

I never got an opportunity to study in a school.
Absolutely true. It is a fact of my life. Our family was very conservative and education for girls was not supported at all. In those days, my elder brothers became professors and engineers—but girls of our family were not lucky enough to go to school. Whatever little Bengali I learnt to read and write was at home and due to my mother’s initiative. My mother was very fond of reading books. She was a regular reader of literary books published by Basumati. The literary magazines like Narayan, Bangadarshan, came regularly to our house. ‘Ma’ was a member of three libraries. From childhood, I used to read wolfishly all those books without anybody’s knowledge—I was never choosy about books. While reading, I had a feeling that I may write as well. On a momentary decision, I had mailed a poem to Shishusathi. To my astonishment, it was not only accepted, the editor Rajkumarbabu kept on sending me letters encouraging me to write more. The magazine started publishing my writings frequently. Many other editors of various children’s magazines collected my address from Shishusathi and got in touch asking me to send my writings to them. In this manner, I became a regular contributor to various journals and magazines.

PC:

When did you start writing for adults?

AD:

I continued to write for children till the age of 28. My first published writing for adults was in the Durga Puja volume of Ananda Bazar Patrika—it was 1343 B.S. (1936–7). At the time Mr Manmatha Sanyal was in charge of the Rabibasariya, a Sunday supplement of Ananda Bazar Patrika. The name of the story was Patni O Preyoshi (The Wife and the Lover), a comedy ... Let me share a secret with you: at the root of my literary career were the editors of those days. If they did not encourage me to send my writings for publication, I would have stopped and my literary career would have ended there.

PC:

Did you write for Prabasi then? (p.261)

AD:

Prabasi was a very popular magazine of the time among the elite class. Prabasi never asked me for my writings nor did I contribute. Sita Devi’s husband, Sudhir Kumar Chowdhury, came to my Golpark residence once with a request to write for the 60th Anniversary Special edition of Prabasi.

PC:

Which was your first book?

AD:

PC:

When did you get married?
AD:

When I was only 15 years old, my husband Kalidas Gupta was an employee in Mercantile Bank. Later he worked for National City Bank in Kolkata and lived in Bhowanipur. The ancestral home, for five generations, of my in-laws was near Majherpara Rajbari in Krishnanagar. Baradole fair used to be held there during Annapurna Puja. I went there every year during that time.

PC:

Did your husband encourage you to write?
AD:

Very much so. The fact that I used to write delighted my in-laws. I did not face any resistance from any of them. The only hindrance was lack of time. I was never criticized nor did I ever hear any snide remark for writing. I pursued my literary career the same smooth way as I lived my family life.

PC:

But you had to struggle in life, didn’t you?
AD:

The struggle was because literature was never given a priority over family life—my sole concern was my family. My in-laws, my father-in-law, mother-in-law, two brothers- in-law, all stayed with me; so our house was always full. I sincerely tried to fulfil my duties towards them to my utmost ability. (p.262)

PC:

Did you make that adjustment (that amounted to denial) only to maintain peace and happiness in the family? I mean, do you think women have been given the legitimate space they deserve in society?
AD:

No, not really! 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 education. This pain accumulated day after day in my mind and had its outlet in every fold of my writings.

PC:

Do you write with a certain agenda in your mind, or is it that you write whatever comes spontaneously?
AD:

You are also a writer. You know that writing comes spontaneously. I came to writing for adults in this manner. I don’t write with any specific mindset. Whatever was there in my mind has found expression in my writing.
But as you were encaged within the four walls of domestic life, how did you see life?
AD:

From within those four walls itself. My parents and my in-laws were neither rich nor poor. I did not have the opportunity to experience neither the sorrow of poverty nor the affluence of the upper class. The undulating lifestyle of a middle-class Bengali is what I have experienced. However, an entire lifetime can be spent watching it pass by.

What is your assessment on women? In your books, particularly in the trilogy Pratham Pratisruti, you have drawn a curve about the world of women—about their hopes and aspirations. Do you think that the notion about women has undergone a change in the present age? (p.263)
AD:

The perception about women has always been very poor in our society. People regretted the birth of a girl child. It is not that there has been any difference in the appraisal between a boy and a girl; but now there is no lack of freedom as well.

How do you view this emancipation? Don’t you think this is merely superficial and that the liberation of the inner self is yet to happen?
AD:

While dealing with ‘the woman question’ I have found that the bondage is within women themselves. Have they been able to grasp the true nature of emancipation? I ask women what they understand by ‘emancipation’. Many of them say that they have to obey their husbands. Again, in the domestic life men have to abide by what women say. Men want to earn fame, wealth, and comfort, and be successful and established in life. Women too want that, but their limit is within a domestic boundary, not outside. Here she cannot do without help from men. A man can build his life without the help of a woman; but a woman cannot build herself without the help of someone in the ‘rival camp’, that is, a man. She needs a family where she will be both the slave and ruler. This is an impediment to her emancipation.

Is this imploring instinctive? Is the need for family natural to a woman?
AD:
If she is denied this need, then she would be left with no option but to resign herself to solitude (a lonely life in a forest). Hence, no woman seeks emancipation sans family. I say, without falling prey to the need, women should move towards developing a self-sufficiency, which would establish them. Women can be more glorious than men by fulfilling the role of a mother. Earlier, a woman’s life was replete with harassment. But, even now, have we really got a free, emancipated (p.264) life? A woman has to consider—is a man’s life desirable for her? And, will she live alone, abandoning men?

PC:

You must be reading a lot?

AD:

Yes. But my reading is limited to Bengali books. I read books by Hemchandra. My mother used to subscribe to Balok, Shishu, Sandesh. I used to read all those magazines in my childhood; or even read the almanac if nothing else was available. I became a member of Sahitya Parishad (library) in order to read magazines and journals.

PC:

Were you acquainted with Saratchandra [Chattopadhyay]?

AD:

When at Aswini Dutta Road, we used to be close neighbours. But it was difficult for me to go anywhere outside and get acquainted with others. My first public appearance was at the age of 40 when I was invited to chair a meeting in Srirampur. Let me tell you something amusing. A girl from my locality used to go to Bethune School. I used to watch her every day going to school, with my suppressed longing. It was miserable, I must tell you, but later when I grew older, I was invited to the same school to distribute prizes.

PC:

How did you manage to write such a voluminous novel—Pratham Pratisruti?

AD:

I wrote in between my domestic chores. I stopped my writing to find out what items would be cooked for the day. My elder brother used to say: ‘You could have written much more had you not wasted time talking to people.’ I used to reply: ‘Barda (eldest brother), I would not have been able to write otherwise. I cannot write if the house is not in order.’ There was a time when I did everything, including the cooking. Now I live like an empress. My daughter-in-law can manage the whole lot on her own, very efficiently. Sadly, I am now unable to write at night because of my bad eyesight. (p.265)

PC:

Didi, you have written so many books ... have you been able to convey satisfactorily everything that you wanted to?

AD:
Is that possible? How can one finish saying everything? Life moves on without a pause. Times are also changing. Along with that, even the views of life undergo a change. Perhaps I am not being able to express, but the past can never be erased from memory. So I continued writing about life; I cannot write about politics, offices, or the judiciary.

PC:

Do you have anything particular to say to women?

AD:

Women have plenty of things to do. They should not cry over spilt milk and be remorseful about what they could not get. Conversely, the attitude of those who head society in education and culture is not favourable in this regard. Cultural enrichment can dawn only if teachings of the West merge with Indian morality. The majority of our girls remain satisfied if they get two square meals a day and can provide the same for their husbands. The reformers contentedly move forward without looking back at the consequences. In relation to this, let me share an anecdote with you. Once a social worker (female) who worked for the slums, said, ‘You know, I am finished. My mother-in-law is coming from Burdwan for medical consultation—as if there is no doctor there. I live in a small flat; she will arrive there with all the muck and other paraphernalia. How will I continue my work?’ Seeing her social activities, I had an impression that the woman was very generous. Yet, to my amazement, I found that it was utterly wrong. Her attitude really put me off. The inclination she showed towards social service was not as intense as it seemed; in fact it was rather superficial. One cannot always be lucky enough to receive, the spark of giving should be realized from within.

(p.266)

PC:

You have written so much about love, what is your viewpoint on love?

AD:

I have not written much about youthful romance. Love as it matures with age becomes profound. It is possible to continue to love without impairing social life. Rather that would give a sense of completeness; and it is not condemnable either. Pre-marital love can be fostered even while staying within the boundary of conjugal life. Like poetry and songs, love is also a treasure.

PC:

When do you feel that you are successful?

AD:

When the readers write letters to me stating their satisfaction; when young girls write: how do you know so much about us? Once an old woman wrote to me: ‘It has been worth living till this ripe age of 93 only to read your Pratham Pratisruti’.

PC:

Did you come in contact with Rabindranath?
AD:

Once I wrote a letter to Rabindranath in my childhood and received a reply too. He had written: *Ashapurna Sampurna* (Ashapurna you are complete). After that, I did not dare to write again.

Epilogue: *Amar Kachhe (To Me)*

*God*: To me God is all. He decides our destiny and regulates everything. I believe firmly in God as to me faith in God brings peace to the mind.

*Guruism*: To me Guru is our protector. He shields us and shows us the way to divine life. Faith in spirituality was already there in me. Later Purnananda Swami, who was the younger of the two maternal uncles of my father-in-law (who had turned into an ascetic), indoctrinated me at the age of 20. My father-in-law had taken me to him. (p.267)

*Happiness*: To me to get a good book is the happiest moment. I remember bringing a hardbound *Bharatbarsha* from the library in my childhood. When everyone had left the room switching off the light, I sneaked up on the switch to put on the light again and started to read it with renewed enthusiasm. Travelling also makes me feel happy.

*Pain*: To me betrayal by a human being is the most painful thing. It hurts me to find malice in somebody whom I had thought to be noble all along. One gathers many experiences with age. Earlier the literary world was a blissful abode for me. Later I realized everyone is only human: ‘to err is human’. Yet, I feel hurt when I see the lack of goodness in someone whom I thought to be good.

*Love*: To me love came from all corners. I could not find anyone who does not love me. Perhaps those who do not love me do not come to me. I wonder what I have done to make so many people love me so much.

Notes

(†) Published originally in *College Street*, Calcutta, February 1988, pp. 3–9. Translated by Dipannita Datta.

(1) ‘To err is human, to forgive divine’—Alexander Pope (1688–1744), English Poet and Satirist *An Essay on Criticism*.

(p.268) I Pen Down all which Happens†

*Ashapurna Devi in Conversation with Chitra Deb*

Prologue
Within the corpus of Bengali literature and culture, Ashapurna Devi is a renowned name, known as a meticulous artist of middle-class morals and sentiments. She has been a practicing litterateur for over 65 years and has authored innumerable short stories and novels—the most noteworthy being the trilogy of i Pratham Pratisrut (The First Promise), Subarnalata (Subarnalata), and Bakulkatha (Bakul’s Story or The Chronicles of Bakul). The focus of the trilogy is the history of the antahpur which has been systematically disregarded in male-authored texts. Ashapurna Devi has not only tried to represent the eluding image of the deprived woman whose talents have been repressed and thus wasted within the domestic confines, but also narrated the revolutionary and explosive attitude of the ever-neglected woman. Personally she hailed from an ordinary middle-class background—both as daughter and housewife—whose orthodoxy did not permit her to go to school. Her literary genius flourished even though her associations and experiences were confined within the four walls of the household. She has proved that human beings can overcome circumstantial difficulties with strong motivation. She has been felicitated with awards like the Jnanpith and titles like Desikottam, but they have never been deterrent to her duties as a homemaker. Though an octogenarian, her views are quite modern. The purpose of this interview was to understand her perspective on women and one would be amazed to notice her integrity as she does not deter to discuss the drawbacks of women together with their problems. She identifies the need for introducing certain changes in either case and looks at life very objectively instead of fictionalizing and or complicating it.

CHITRA DEB (CD):

What led to your foray into literature?

ASHAPURNA DEVI (AD):

Perhaps it would be incorrect to say that it was a conscious venture. Actually I happened to write something (a poem) when I was all of 13 years of age and was too young and naïve to understand that it was a kind of foraying into a field; moreover it was a well-kept secret till it was published! It was a children’s magazine and they sent a letter enquiring about my interest in penning short stories and also requesting me to send the same. That request gave me an impetus—one had been published and they were asking for more! Since my family was conservative, girls were not sent to school; I was no exception to be given an opportunity either. But I have always read stories and novels. My mother had a passion for literature; on one hand was the whole world and on the other was reading. Thus, we had a lot of books at home. She had all the books of those times and also subscribed to all the magazines that were available. Her hunger for reading was comparable to the hunger of Kumbhakarna, and therefore there was always a ready stock of books at home. Since we did not have to go to school, we never had to solve Maths or study English or Geography; we had ample time to read these books without restrictions and we did so from quite a young age. From this, I developed the aspiration to write as well, and you may call it the beginning of my foray into literature. (p.270)
CD:
Did your sisters also write?
AD:
My eldest sister was not much into writing but she did sketch a few pictures. My younger sister wrote beautiful poetry and could paint as well. She is no more. As she was shy, she never allowed them to be published, though some were.
CD:
At that time did anyone encourage you?
AD:
Not really, there was no one to encourage me personally as I never had the opportunity to interact with anyone outside my family. My father, the late Harendra Nath Gupta, used to sketch of which quite a few have been published in *Bharatbarsha*; in fact the cover of the first edition was designed by him. My father had several acquaintances like Jaladhar Sen but we were never allowed to meet them. We could only peep from outside and see whether it was a writer or an artist, that’s all. However, much later we had developed a good rapport with the late Purnachandra Chakravarty who, though not my father’s pupil, was very respectful towards him.
CD:
What are you particularly fond of writing?
AD:
I started out with children’s writing which I still like, and over and above that I am particularly fond of penning short stories for adult readers. Novels follow closely.
CD:
Which publication delighted you the most?
AD:
Most naturally and obviously the first one published. But after the trilogy was published, I was particularly content as there was a flavour of complete success involved as a lot of preparation had gone behind its creation and I had sincerely wished that it would be published.
CD:
You had started your career with poetry and your first award too was for poetry (‘Sneha’, *Khokakhuku*) but we never got the poet Ashapurna later. Why did you discontinue writing poetry? (p.271)
AD:
I did not discontinue, and I did write some in my personal notebooks, but no one ever asked for them. People have always asked for stories and on principle I never offer anything till I am asked for it. I remember having sent them without being asked only on three occasions: to Shishusathi, Bharatbarsha, and Ananda Bazaar Patrika. After that, I have never repeated it. Perhaps if I was asked for poems instead of stories I would have written more of them.

CD:

While writing stories and novels did you always complete considering the plot, episodes, and characters at the preparation stage and then start writing?

AD:

My prime concern has always been my characters, who I try to fit into the framework of events and then proceed. Often there are deviations from the original thought and it seems as if I was not their director and that they were travelling according to their own wish.

CD:

You have incorporated a wide spectrum of characters in your fiction. How did you know them?

AD:

This is a tough question, as I was always confined to the four walls of the house, both my maiden and marital homes being conventional in their outlook. I have seen the world through a window. Till I was 40 no one actually knew who Ashapurna Devi was and often considered it to be the pseudonym of a male author. Later when I started interacting with the outside world, I was told about the misconception: ‘just as Premenda and Sajanikanta Das were pseudonyms, we thought the same in your case’. That day I sort of reprimanded them and enquired: ‘Is it so that profound writing is an attribute of men alone?’ Since I was old, I dared to be courageous. But perhaps, on second thoughts, the reason for their thinking me to be a male author was because of the fact that in my erstwhile compositions the ‘me’ was a ‘man’; in a way I happened to look at society from a male perspective. (p.272)

CD:

They say everything was childhood reminiscence—what about your autobiography?

AD:
Nothing in my life can surmount to an autobiography; and I strongly believe that an autobiography cannot evolve from such a simplistic existence. We were eight siblings and led a very simple life. My brothers were educated but we sisters were confined from the age of 12. My mother warned us on one occasion that it was the last time we could go out and enjoy the Pujas as we were growing up. I have often contemplated that if I had belonged to a very economically backward home or a very affluent one then perhaps things would have been different; there would be misery and poverty or extreme wealth all of which can be written about. But it was all middle class: in condition and mentality; only my father was an artist and my mother was a lover of literature. Perhaps that is why we were different in some ways from our cousins. But this cannot be the matter of an autobiography! I had written a novel Drishya theke Drishyantore (Vignettes) which has shades of my personal life but it is not entirely me. To be precise it reflects my times very vividly.

CD:

Nowadays you are a regular contributor to dailies—does the fact that you were not one earlier pose a problem?
AD:

Just an anecdote: When Bartaman* was first published, a column called Dheu Gunchi Sagarer (Counting the Waves) was being serialized.† When they asked me to contribute, I was not very confident simply because I had not written anything within a time frame. At times, I have written some light and trendy narratives for Akashbaani, that’s all. They said that was enough and asked me to pull through for three months and till date I am doing their assigned job of counting the waves! Each time I decide on discontinuing, I am coaxed against it and since the waves of the ocean never cease, similarly my counting will perhaps be lifelong.

CD:

How do you like Western literature? What are its similarities with our society and culture?
AD:
I am fluent in my mother tongue only; thus, my exposure to Western literature is limited as I have read translations in Bangla and it is not befitting to comment on that basis. However, I have eagerly read whatever I have got and from that I feel that irrespective of the circumstances, place, time, and/or people under purview, inherently they are alike. In our country too, since the times of Mahabharata, the value system has remained unchanged. Though there have been sea changes owing to circumstances, the intrinsic framework has been retained. Over the years, society has influenced individuals—the love of power, property, women, and drinks has always loomed large. Thus it has never been able to be completely free of immorality, not even today. And the role of women, as active participants, in ‘creating’ society has always been insignificant. She has been a lover and roused suspicion, been a spy, and created danger and caused temporary upheavals; that is the limit of her travails. Also, mothers have been able to influence their sons only till a certain age; after that they become self-sufficient and determiners of their own destiny. Thus, patriarchal societies have been omnipresent and eternal.

CD:

You are familiar with Indian literature in other languages—what is your opinion about it?

AD:

I have read the available translations and feel that all Indians are alike in their hopes and aspirations, and reaction to joy and grief. The only difference lies in the manner in which they combat them. In my limited sphere of knowledge, I think people are gradually becoming narrow-minded. Initially there used to be big homes, big balconies, big families, and big things, but presently everything is becoming small and so is the human mind. Consequently, their capacity to be affectionate and compassionate is also on the ebb—by and large they are becoming selfish.

CD:

Since your texts have been translated, the non-Bengali reader is also familiar with them. Are they fond of your works?

AD:

I think they are, as the translators say that there is much demand for my writing and publishers ask me to write more. So I assume that readers like them. But at times I am curious whether the typical Bengali domestic flavour is carried in the Malayalam, Tamil, and Marathi versions. But there is proof of it reaching their hearts through their letters to me.

CD:

As a reader of Bengali literature, do you think that it is improving or on the decline? Many people regret the fall in standards. What is your opinion?

AD:
I am with them and foster a similar disappointment—former texts have always been a delight to read but current works may not always be good reading. Perhaps our age and (p.275) conditioned thinking are at fault because readers of the present generation are fond of the new texts. Literature emanates from certain trends and traits of society and is a reflection of the culture. It may be said that they run on parallel tracks and that they are mirrors of one another reflecting and refracting optimally, trying to outdo the other. Thus, to confirm that it was good before and is bad now is not reasonable; it would be better to acknowledge that they are mutually exclusive, which is only natural. ‘Literature’ and ‘society’ are not separate entities. Social trends are dynamic like life itself and it is meaningless to draw comparisons.

CD:

Do you read recent writing?

AD:

I read everything but have never liked political discourses. I am fond of whatever touches the emotions easily. I am more of a reader than a writer and even now when I am engrossed, I carry on till 2 a.m.!

CD:

Who is your favourite author?

AD:

Tagore obviously leads, but Bankimchandra is a close second. At some point of time when I did not have anything else to read I have read one of the latter’s book over a hundred times perhaps! I also liked reading Saratchandra, but nowadays at times they seem too sentimental; nonetheless it is difficult to put them by, once you have started reading. Other all-time favourites are Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and Manik Bandyopadhyay. Initially I did not enjoy Manik Bandyopadhyay’s writing much, but I did not give up and after four or five texts developed a remarkable liking for it too. Premendra Mitra was yet another favourite author and I always wanted to see him. I knew his residence and often passed by with my mother-in-law while on our way to the Ganges for some ritual or other. Also, Budhadev Basu’s grandmother was a friend of my mother-in-law and I felt like (p.276) taking a glimpse into their household, but it never materialized. Later on I have interacted with all of them but always felt that I knew them through their writing. Among women writing during that time, I was particularly fond of Anurupa Devi, Nirupama Devi, Indira Devi, Sailabala Ghosh Jaya, Giribala Devi, and Jyotirmoyi Devi to name a few. Actually, the whole world of literature itself was a part of my mind and existence.

CD:

Have the later women authors influenced you or have you borrowed their experiences?

AD:
Whether I have been influenced is for the reader to decide. But all my knowledge is from books, so I may have borrowed unconsciously. I have never imitated anyone but since all erstwhile writers are supposed to be ideal it was said that subsequent writers must/may follow their example. Sailabala Ghosh Jaya had a different style of writing; she was never authoritarian. My works have also systematically delineated the inner lives of women and their psyche; it was never aimed at untying the complexities of their external existence. My writings have primarily been psychologically oriented, never anecdotal.

CD:

At times authors have alleged that they have had to alter the course of events according to the likes of readers. Has any such predicament affected you?

AD:

No! I have never done it. But I must say that I have never faced any such strong request and moreover I have not written too many serial novels. On some occasion, as in for some magazine, I may have altered the course of events, but that was a personal decision, not inspired by readers. This has happened in the case of Puja issues of periodicals when I have been compelled to complete it within a stipulated time period. As a result it may not have been perfect, and I have had to incorporate certain changes, not more than that. I feel very lazy to read my own writing twice over. (p.277)

CD:

Many of your short stories and novels have been adapted into films and plays. Have they ever outdone the original or failed to represent the essence that you had intended?

AD:

To be very honest, the level of fulfilment can never be the same in both as the medium is different. I understand the certain changes become essential, but at the same time one does not always feel happy to see those changes. But if it is close to the original then it is acceptable. Devakibabu’s Navajanma (Rebirth) gave me the impression that the film was better; same with Chhayasurya (Sun and Shade), Jogbiyog (Addition-subtraction), and Shashibabur Sansar (Shashibabu’s Family) were raised to a separate class owing to Chhabi Biswas’s acting skills. At times the persona of the characters in the fiction and the film do not match well. Then it is agonizing for the writer. On television I did not particularly like the way Ek Shomudro Onek Dheu (One Sea but Many Waves) ended. It seemed as if the child-protagonist suffered the lashing of waves but at the end when he reached the shore, he was not duly rewarded; in fact he was also denied the world of love and faith. The stark reality of life has gained prominence but doesn’t the child deserve something?

CD:

What is your prime concern when you are writing for children?

AD:
I try my best to understand their minds at the outset. I feel that they always nurture an antagonistic attitude towards adults, that adults always try to show them their place and always reprimand them unjustly. This is perhaps specific to the present generation. In our times children always accepted the authoritative regime of elders. Apart from that, conservatism is not always bearable. However, according to me, children have a world of their own where adults are like opponents. (p.278)

CD:

Child psychology is perhaps best perceived by mothers. Therefore it is perhaps easier for women to author children’s literature. What is your opinion on that?

AD:

Just because mothers understand their children well, it is not so that fathers do not/cannot understand them. Children’s literature has always gained prominence in the hands of men—there are such masterpieces. I was very fond of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Abanindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore, Sukumar Ray, and Sunirmal Basu’s works, and especially the latter, though he is not much heard of now. In fact men have written much more for children than women have. Leela Majumdar has taken up substantial space in this sphere; prior to that we have Sukhlata Rao; Sita Devi and Santa Devi who have also contributed occasionally. Thus the creator of children’s fiction is man.

CD:

What kind of books do children prefer nowadays?

AD:
I think that they always have a penchant for fairy tales—the impossible and the incredible. But they read whatever they are given with the current trend being sci-fi comics which have spacecrafts to reach other planets. These are also similar to fairy tales. But they traverse the horizon of imagination on a spacecraft instead of winged-horse. There are some issues of violence in detective fiction, and in substantial amounts. They read whatever is available; though not all, but avid readers do. Nowadays children are pressurized a lot. Apart from studies, there is parental pressure to fulfil their expectations, more so of mothers. They try to tutor the child in all areas at the same time. Moreover she is used as a tool for competing with others and also for fulfilling unfulfilled personal desires. Studies are complemented with art classes, music, swimming, and the like. Since the number of children being born is coming down, one is expected to fulfil all the wishes of the parent; if there were three or four, the parents’ wishes could be distributed among them. Since the single child is so stressed she finds it restful to read comics. According to some, there have been certain unbefitting things in children’s literature. Like the kings and suyorani–duyorani episodes which entailed the concept of the nasty stepmother. Weren’t jealousy, pride, hatred, meanness often included in child fiction? What did it not have? But of course they were well wrapped in foil paper. It boiled down to fairy tales. It seemed to the child that they do not belong to us, but inhabit another world all together. But those of today make children feel associated with the characters and circumstance, as if they are one and the same. Thus it becomes imperative to be extra cautious about things like murders and violence which should be carefully avoided. In detective/crime fiction too such things should be bypassed and the use of wit to solve cases should be given importance. The bottom line is that children’s literature is not an easy task to accomplish.

CD:

You have received many awards. Which is your best?

AD:

According to me, the greatest achievement has been the appreciation from readers. But throughout my literary career the awards that I have received have sometimes been beyond my expectations. In fact, I could never imagine that one was capable of getting so much love from readers and I am appalled by their responses at times. It may seem ridiculous to you, but at times they have become emotional after meeting me as they had never imagined so. It has been quite embarrassing at times, but I have smiled and said “Good lord, I have been born and brought up in Kolkata; it was quite possible to meet me over these years.” But I firmly believe in the power of the Almighty and have always remained indebted to Him. That is why I have been able to overcome all kinds of trials that life had in store for me and feel quite content with my existence. Outwardly in terms of my literary career there have never been too many impediments. It was a comfortable journey—just like a smooth drive on a well-pitched road. Is this not rewarding enough? Again, on the home front I have never experienced any conflict because of my literary life. They have been like two wheels of a car—always moving ahead in unison. But deep in my heart, I have given priority to my family.
CD:

You have mentioned that you are a successful writer and homemaker. What is the chief reason behind it?

AD:

You’ll are the best adjudicators of my success. Perhaps it has been possible because I have given priority to my role as a homemaker and I have always considered my home as myself. I feel that for women the home is the ground beneath her feet and her life is the sky above. I believe that if there is no firm ground then the aim for the sky becomes precarious. Therefore, I always ensured that I had a solid base and worked upon it. Moreover my husband has always been very liberal and supportive in all my endeavours and never stopped me from anything. I have heard from many of my contemporaries that their husbands have resented their spouse’s career as a writer. But I have never faced any such problem; in fact my husband was particularly warm towards all those who appreciated my writing and were fond of me as well. He was familiar with litterateurs and it so happened that after business matters with me were over they spent substantial time with him over a friendly chat. Many people were under the impression that I am discreet about my writing as my mother-in-law is unhappy about it, but it is a misconception. It was not possible, since prior to marriage it was known to them that their daughter-in-law is a writer. Since she belonged to the previous generation she was particular about certain customs and had some reservations too. Moreover she was (p.281) an indomitable woman. But if I spent time on my own work after attending to hers then she would never object. She used to tell me that I should read more of sacred texts rather than novels and plays and reproduce them. I only said that I read whatever I can lay my hands on, and when I don’t get anything I take up an almanac and sometimes reread the old books. Thus it’s not true that I don’t read religious texts. But yes, I have not thought of writing one!

CD:

_Pratham Pratisruti, Subarnalata, and Bakulkatha_—how did you conceive them?

AD:

I had always wished to represent the struggle that women had to put up to come out of the antahpur, which would roughly spread across three generations. The era that I have not experienced and based it upon hearsay from aunts is the world of _Pratham Pratisruti_; the one depicted in _Subarnalata_ is the one in which I have grown up, and the third is the present. I always wanted to rewrite the world of the antahpur and the preface to _Pratham Pratisruti_ mentions it. In male-authored texts, the history of the antahpur has been misrepresented from the point of view of women. You have written _Antahpur Atmakatha_ (An Autobiography of the Antahpur) but previously such works were unheard of; the lives of those women were shrouded in darkness.
Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay has mostly written historical and cultural texts but they are representative of love, sorrow, hatred, and self-sacrifice rather than the domestic space. The areas where women have revolted from the confines of the antahpur have been silenced and this too was a major source of inspiration. But Saratchandra had been able to perceive the condition of women and their subtle rebellion against it.

It was not the union of souls or love or separation that gained primacy in my works, but the pained and stifled souls (p.282) under the rigours of domestic life and society. Alongside I have tried to paint a picture of the constant restructuring of the antahpur from where society, generations, and the mentality of the masses begin to get influenced. I cannot recollect the exact date but it was after having written several short stories—and there were three or four of them based on the same couple—which was published as a novel titled Angshik, and it is a part of Subarnalata as I always thought of writing about the earlier era. From a very young age I had noticed the gender divide and social conditioning among family members and relatives. The prevalent notion was that girls were nothing and boys were gems and it was very offensive but no one had the courage to protest as it was sacrilegious to speak out against elders. Thus, it was almost like giving vent to pent-up frustration and Satyabati becomes an epitome of the same. But the context and subtext were partially fictional though based on my experiences and observations within the family. Women were always expected to be subordinate to men with the exception of those who were senior, who also wielded power in some respect; the plight of young girls especially daughters-in-law was gruesome. All this disturbed me and I always tried to locate the cause behind such injustice, which was duly reflected in my writings and affected certain people; but one usually pens one's experiences. Many times people have told me that there are parallels between my mother and the character of Subarnalata and I have never denied it—she has always been very firm and adamant and given a lot of importance to principles. In our childhood lying was equivalent to murder! Moreover, she had a taste for literature and in order to pursue her reading she had dissociated from the joint family despite much criticism and opposition. My writings echo such incidents. Bakul is a portrayal of my conception of contemporary society and its women and there can be no similarity between her and my life as she is a young girl and I (p.283) am a middle-aged homemaker. Actually she is an observer in the novel not a participant in the course of events, and is keen to understand the complexities of life and the world. The comings and goings of Satyabati and Subarnalata's lives form the structure of the novels and Bakul is an omniscient witness. Readers try to find strains of me in all three and I would only like to say that though I cannot be part of three generations, the self is tucked away somewhere in my writing.
Did you want to wage a protest against society? How did the creation of these women emanate?

AD:

I had created these women with a view to voice a protest against the predicament of women but I never wanted to make it explicit. Whatever has agonized me over the years has gone behind the creation of my characters; also the plot of all my writing is inspired by real life incidents. I have never been judgmental about any issue but only documented episodes. Nonetheless, I have been able to reach out to the masses and now when I look back on all my efforts I feel that they have not gone in vain. Coming to the context of creating defiant women, it will be difficult for readers to draw parallels with my personal life as I was the most obedient among my siblings and my parents’ favourite for being so. Simply because I have never been haughty or vocal in my protests it seemed that I have conformed to everything and was praised at my in-laws’ as well. But I must admit that I was lucky because the people at my in-laws’ place never read what I wrote, they were happy about the fact that their daughter-in-law was an author; hence my rebellious image remained camouflaged. Moreover as I have always been peace-loving there has been no opportunity to find similarities between my external image and my works. Despite this, I have never lost focus of what I wanted to express through my writing and they have been authored from a middle-(p.284) class standpoint. Many incidents bear testimony to the fact that people who seem to be happy are actually not so and those who seem to be aggrieved are in reality, quite the contrary. Thus, there is a discrepancy in the external image and the real self which often becomes the subject matter of my texts. My texts were never political or service oriented but about the common trials and tribulations of women at home who preferred to leave their home and husbands when the situation became unbearable. Throughout I have nurtured a relentless rebellious zeal which was impersonal. If you wish to call it a thirst for the liberation of women, so be it. It was meant for general agency rather than relieving personal angst.

CD:

Among all the trials that women have faced, which has agitated you the most? Women’s remorse and anguish along with their problems have found dominance in your works. What is your perception of contemporary women?

AD:
Initially it was primarily the incarcerated condition of women that troubled me most; something which I had seen right from childhood. It was coupled with the fact that they could never be the rightful claimants of anything. These are absent from present society; at least legally they can claim their rights. Presently they are in a situation whereby they have received their share of independence outside the home but whether that is being utilized optimally is a matter of conjecture. Is the so-called reverie of independence finding its due manifestation among modern young women? However, the problems of the present generation are no less, perhaps more than the previous. Currently they have become prototypes of the Goddess Durga with ten hands—managing the home along with their careers. This extraordinary ability of theirs is commendable! But tolerance is almost missing or negligible. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that this intolerance is \( \text{(p.285)} \) the harbinger of a lot of troubles. This is perhaps the only drawback, without which this portrait of the modern woman would be complete. I feel that the first step towards education, culture, and conduct is tolerance—to think about others patiently!

There is another problem, though women are quite excited about women’s liberation, are they actually aware of the term liberation? They have not been able to establish themselves in their respective fields with self-respect and at times misconstrue it as self-pride. Till such time as they are able to ignore materialistic longings, it is impossible to be independent. In fact, women are much too worldly—be it with respect to trivial things or other human beings—like, the desire to have exclusive ownership over one’s husband and children who will only love her. They wish to have complete control over everything, which makes the children have less faith on their father. As they grow up, they become self-centred and rash, just as they have learnt from their mother.

CD:

Most of the former women litterateurs have been erased from the memory of people—why is that so?

AD:

Whether one is to be remembered or not is largely manoeuvred by patriarchs of world of literature. They choose to forget women because they have never read their works. Moreover critics also seem nonchalant about women’s writing as there is a sense of fellow feeling that operates between them. They have never analysed the breadth of women’s experience that has been incorporated in their works. It is true that during those years women had limited understanding, as they never got the platform and exposure to nurture them. Perhaps, from some works, the element of permanence was missing and erasure was inevitable. Forgetting about authors like Sailabala Ghosh Jaya is unethical as is the case with Ashalata Sinha, Anurupa Devi, Nirupama Devi, \( \text{(p.286)} \) and Indira Devi. This is a flaw of patriarchal society; they just ignore the aptitude of women.

CD:
Tagore has observed that the tendency to belittle and be unjust towards women is because men have not received much intellectual support from them. They usually look after our basic amenities and satisfy our physical needs and hence we gradually lose regard for them. Do you agree with him?

AD:

This is a vital and final statement. It is true that men have not got assistance from women in cerebral matters—the need for one another is need-based, for the latter’s happiness and wish-fulfilment. Though the situation is somewhat different now, the conditioning remains. Women find it easier and perhaps desirable to excel in their careers rather than being truly loved by their spouse. If women could boldly protest against the unfair means of acquiring wealth that men resort to, wouldn’t there be much less corruption in the world? Much of the cause for the gluttony of wealth may be attributed to women.

CD:

Doesn’t Saratchandra’s fiction give us the impression that women are best suited for nursing and nurturing the family?

AD:

Saratchandra had experienced a different world all together and was adept at painting the minds of women beautifully. He was able to depict the power, determination, and resilience among women, which Tagore had also overlooked. Whereas Tagore’s women were larger-than-life characters, Saratchandra opted for more down-to-earth people and portrayed the domestic sphere vividly. His women were good care-givers and also emotionally charged but at the same time, very resolute in some cases and they hailed from various sections of society. His heroines have never strived to be equal to their male counterparts but have always tried to be better than them. There is a magnanimity underlying their puniness. (p.287)

CD:

In modern Bengali literature is ‘the woman question’ being addressed?

AD:

I have not noticed a significant representation. Current literature is more concerned with personal problems. Though Mahasweta Devi deals with social issues, it focuses on the backward classes, which is not specific to women. Men have never been much concerned about the problem of women. Previously, the pathetic condition of women motivated social reformers to contemplate on their problems. Otherwise, why is Vidyasagar called a pioneer? Nowadays the focus is on rural women—their personal agony and physical stings but not on women as a marginalized group. But whatever little is being written, is by men.

CD:

Apart from literature and family what are the other attractions in your life?

AD:
Nothing else, I have never painted nor have I been inclined to music despite my father being an artist. My sisters could draw and I always loved to read and travel. When my wedding was on the cards, I used to think that if my husband was a librarian it would be really nice as I will have access to many books. Also, if he was employed in the railways it would be a good option as I would be able to travel far and wide. But none of that happened; my husband was a banker! Despite the desire, resources were limited. Therefore, I restricted my fancies to reading and writing alone and have always strived to attend to them after completing all domestic chores and I have been successful in my endeavour.

CD:

How successful are you as a creator?
AD:

‘Creator’—never thought of myself as one as I never ventured into writing to be a writer. It was a natural consequence, just like a rolling ball. That I have been able to voice my opinion in the correct manner is what I count as my success. (p. 288)

CD:

You have received many awards and felicitations—were you personally present everywhere?
AD:

No, I have not been able to make it to every award function. But I had been to Santiniketan for the Desikottam title and to have a last look of the place as I was almost immobile at that time. There was another reason for visiting Santiniketan for one last time—we had built a house there and we had planned to move residence after my husband’s retirement. Unfortunately circumstances did not permit that and thus the desire. I had not been lucky enough to go to Santiniketan while Tagore still lived nonetheless, the mysticism of the place remains.

CD:

How would you describe the era in which we are living?
AD:

I am not really a part of this generation. Moreover I am trapped in a cage and remain a silent observer of recent trends. This generation is quite slippery. I have tried to portray the era in the trilogy but it is impossible to do so now. People have lost the ability to be content and love fellow human beings. The sphere of spreading affection is also on the ebb. Despite several serious attempts they are failing to sustain their happiness. The essence of happiness is missing but people are still on the search of perfect bliss which is fast depleting. As a result they are gradually losing inspiration and aspirations.

CD:

Does literature have any responsibility towards society?
AD:
Literature and society are mutually correlated; therefore, only if a litterateur works whimsically then it may be possible to dissociate them. He or she must be aware of the fact that his or her writings hold value, and should have some commitment to society. The work of a litterateur is to show the way to progress and not write entirely from fancy. Their primary job is to express themselves; if they are unable to accomplish it then it is irksome and they are answerable to themselves for the lapse.

CD:

Some people say that writing too much is not good. What do you think?

AD:

I do not think so. If practice makes everything perfect, then why should writing be an exception? If a razor needs sharpening then why should the pen be spared? Out of twenty attempts, one may be good, but if only one is written chances of it being good are very low. There are various kinds of plants growing on the Earth’s soil—roses to weeds; perhaps it is not fair if one only nurtures roses, some weeds should also be given space to grow as they hold the soil firmly.

CD:

Have you always written to make a point, or because you have a passion for writing? Have you been able to say all that you wished to?

AD:

Now it is no more a question of liking; it is more of a compulsion. But I cannot do without it either. Initially the world of writing carves a special niche in the mind which makes the point effective and strong. But gradually it becomes a habit. Even then, there is always something new to say through the wave of words. But it is impossible to complete all that is to be said as time is limited and gradually there is a cessation of power to wield the same. At times I am not writing but I am being made to write, and it is then that I consider myself to be the stenographer of the Goddess of Learning (Saraswati)—it is an invisible force that keeps me going. Tagore also has a similar observation and asks a rhetorical question—‘what kind of an amusement is this?’ It seems as if this surreal force makes us do all the work. (p.290)

Epilogue

This is not an end, so why call it a conclusion? All this while you have asked me several questions, to which I have answered to the best of my ability. Now I would like to add a few words of my own. Your questions were primarily centred on the theme of the anguish borne by women owing to their incarcerated condition, as well as attempts towards rescuing them, women’s liberation, their esteem, and the fulfilment and aspirations of a woman’s existence. It seems that the source of our elaborate discussion emanated from the crux of my trilogy.
There is more to my writing, through which I have tried to address life and its philosophies at length in other novels and novellas, which are a hundred and fifty in number and short stories which are not less than one and a half thousand. I have been writing for ages and just as occasional cataclysms have occurred in my personal life, society has also experienced several tempestuous and transitional phases. But I have never ceased to write. Along with changes in societal set-ups, the psychosocial outlook has also undergone a metamorphosis. This has influenced my writings inevitably and many a times may seem to depict a self-rebellion. But I always write on the basis of my perception of the world around me. To me the people who are apparently considered as common and insignificant are rich with brightness and vivacity. They may be even capable of sublime thoughts and spiritual realization. People who may have seemed to be ‘circuitous’ and ‘brutal’, may actually be naive and committed. This led to a wonderful realization in my mind—that the brutal and insensitive manifestation may be circumstantial. For instance, at a point of time people believed that to spare the rod would spoil the child; now the notion is to pamper them. Both are equally detrimental to a child’s development; both groups are evenly flawed. (p. 291)

Of all things, man knows himself the least and is completely helpless in this regard. Again, every human being has more inherent and abiding elements in him than could be felt from the periphery. A drastic change in values and ideals may take place in an individual’s life, reducing him to mere shambles. The flux and influx of these realizations compel me to write about what I see around me. Though I have never ventured outside my comfort-zone—which is strictly confined within the four-walled space of the domestic—I have perceived the diversity that life has to offer. A good-looking and intelligent person who desires to scale heights may be compelled to put on a miserable disposition which is spiteful. Though I have written so many short stories there have been very few on popular romances; but I have written on love. Surprisingly, I have witnessed how diabolical and/or dubious truths and lies can be. Again a lump of clay can turn out to be a sparkling diamond.

It is not only about heterosexual relationships, but also the complexities of other interpersonal relationships within the home which constitutes the perennial stream of life; unfurling the curtain of mystery has been the matrix of my short stories. I have never played the role of a protest-writer, but just of an objective observer or an omniscient narrator. But it feels bad that the truths and conflicts revealed in the short stories are somewhat usurped by the rebellious image, and this disheartens me as short-stories are my first love ... Anyway, let us stop now.

Notes
(*‡) Published originally in Desh, Calcutta, 2 February 1991, pp. 68–79. Translated and edited by Prasita Mukherjee and Dipannita Datta.
Bartaman is an Indian Bengali daily newspaper.

Like the waves of the ocean, the column Dheu Gunchi Sagarer (contributed on the request of the editor Barun Sengupta) from a literary perspective records the unending waves of changes of the post postcolonial Indian society that Ashapurna witnessed during the 1980s and early 1990s. The dates of Ashapurna’s contribution are as follows:

3 January–26 December 1986
2 January–25 December 1987
1 January–30 December 1988
6 January–29 December 1989
5 January–28 December 1990
4 January–27 December 1991
3 January 1992
31 July 1992

(p.292) Intellectuals should Refine Our Society and Life

Ashapurna Devi in Conversation with Jhara Basu

Those days no one could imagine that Ashapurna Devi, who never even went to school due to the liabilities of a family, would become a renowned literary figure of this country. She left a big repository of hundred and forty four novels and more than one thousand short stories behind her. This interview was taken a few years before her death.

JHARA BASU (JB):

What is the actual time of your writing?
ASHAPURNA DEVI (AD):

Well, whenever I get time I write. Earlier when there was no time during the day, I used to write at night, but right now, there is ample time. Though, due to constant visits of guests I have to be busy, after their departure I get involved in my literary work. It is a fact that living with the responsibilities of literature and family together, at times, creates many inconveniences but my literary life never gets priority over my family life. However, I do not mind that.

JB:

Would you like to say something about the people who were distinctively acquainted with you?

AD:
I became very close to two persons while pursuing my literary life. I can never forget what they did for me. They are Sri Narendra Dev and Smt. Radharani Devi. Due to the (p.293) responsibility of family, I could not come out of my house; in that regard, they helped me a lot. The first time Sri Narendra Dev came to my house was to take my short story for a collection, which was to be published on behalf of a contest named ‘Kathashilpi’, arranged by Calcutta Chemicals. After that, on the release of that collection, both of them came to take me on the day of the celebration. Thus, I stepped out of the threshold of my house for the first time. At that time, I was 40.

JB:

About some other friends?

AD:

After crossing the threshold, I got many friends, and a few of them were close to me as well, like, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Banaphool, and Premendra Mitra. They always treated me as their younger sister.

JB:

When did your literary life start?

AD:

Since my teenage. My first short story was published in Shishusathi, when I was 13. Later, several magazines used to demand short stories, poems, essays, etc. For elders, my first short story was published in the Puja issue of Ananda Bazar Patrika, when I was 28.

JB:

Who inspired you to write?

AD:

I was inspired by my mother.

JB:

What is the most unforgettable experience in your life?

AD:

That would be the first time I was invited to be the chief guest for the distribution of prizes and awards in a school. I could never go to school for my studies and that day I was the chief guest. It was exhilarating for me, even more so than getting the Jnanpith Award.

JB:

Which book gave you most satisfaction? (p.294)

AD:

My trilogy—Pratham Pratisruti, Swarnalata,* and Bakulkatha.

JB:

Any interests in films?
AD:

Of course, tremendously! Being the Chairperson of the Censor Board for a long time, I got many opportunities. There are almost thirteen of my books which have been turned into Bengali films—Jogbiyog, Agnipriksha, Kalyani, Valaygrass, Navajanma, Shashibabur Sansar, Chhaya Surjo, Dolna, Baluchari, Chena Achen, Anindita, Pratham Pratisruti, and Subarnalata; in Hindi Meherban, Chhoti Si Mulakat, and Chaitali; and Tapasya, Jogbiyog, Agnipriksha, and Chharpatra were turned into Tamil, Telugu, and Oriya films.

JB:

What role do you assign to intellectuals?

AD:

I think intellectuals should be wise people. They should always try to refine our society and life.

JB:

What is your opinion about contemporary Bengali literature? How would you define progressive literature?

AD:

It seems like the branches of a banyan tree spreading all around. Progressive literature tries to take society towards a healthier and higher goal.

JB:

Would you like to convey any message to new writers?

AD:

I have great belief in new writers. They have the courage to demolish harmful traditional thoughts and construct new ones.

Notes

(§) Published (posthumously) in The Scoria, Chandigarh, Vol. 2, No. 7 (April 1999), Chandigarh, pp. 9–10.

(*) Subarnalata has been pronounced as Swarnalata here.

(p.295) The Outside World Comes Willingly to 'Her'**

Enakshi Chattyopadhyay on Ashapurna Devi
It was an agonizing moment. I was being tossed about in the endless waves of household chores, absolutely at my wit’s end trying to cope, when who should call me but the editor of Anandamela. What happened to the story you were supposed to submit? Make it quick, say within three days. The other one can wait for a week. And about the third … On an impulse, I said, ‘I suggest you come over and take charge of my kitchen’. The editor put a counter question — ‘How does Ashapurna Devi write’? Well, what could I say? I fumbled, ‘perhaps late at night’. Then I suggest you do the same, snapped my editor and banged the phone down.

ENAKSHI CHATTYOPADHYAY (EC):

Ashapurna Devi was highly amused when I related the conversation to her. Oh yes, she agreed.

ASHAPURNAB DEVI (AD):

I had to sit up late. To me family chores always came first. My family came before my writing. Nobody should feel neglected—that was foremost in my mind. Being a housewife was a full-time occupation, surrounded by the in-laws, absorbed by Puja rituals and the intricacies of cooking. You must not do anything which would make others talk—that was what my husband used to say. He also wanted me to behave that way. (p.296)

Ever since she came to her husband’s home at the age of fifteen there used to dwell another Ashapurna inside her. You know, she said, ‘… this other self forced me to write. Even when rigorously busy in the kitchen, my other self would be constantly at work.’

She was always pressed for time, even now. Earlier it was the demands of the family, now readers make demands on her time. Letters from her fans, their visits, invitations to meetings—how can she say no to any of them? She could not possibly give excuses, saying I am busy. In spite of the pressure on time, the other Ashapurna never gave up. Today, in spite of her advancing years, she never has an idle moment; she is either writing or reading. ‘I have never seen Ma take respite from writing because of ill health’, said my daughter-in-law Nupur.
According to experts, both, hard work and a congenial environment are essential for mental development. No matter how friendly the surroundings are, Saraswati is not kind to people who do not put in hard work. Practice and hard work, strong determination, working in between household chores, or keeping sleepless nights, putting one word after another on paper—that is the only way to write. There is no short cut. One needs strong will power and perseverance, bending your head, clenching your fists for long hours and most of all an inner urge. The other Ashapurna eggs her on, her other self, a burning flame hidden under the exterior of a happy and contented housewife. What kind of a background did she have? To this question Ashapurna admitted that it was very ordinary. Just like in any other ordinary household, she was one of many such typical girls in a typical household.

My family was conservative; I was not allowed to attend school. I learnt the alphabet by myself. We were not particularly poor but neither were we very rich. But I must admit my mother loved reading, she was passionately fond of books. Father was a painter. Some of his paintings came out in the monthly journal *Bharatbarsha*. This was the family she was born into, and where she grew up. This was where she began writing. Her first composition was published when she was thirteen. She has kept at it ever since.

When she came to her new home at the age of fifteen, it was a different world altogether. Apart from the Gita, *Bhagabat*, and the *Panjika* (the Almanac), the house was devoid of books. They were aware of the fact that the new bride could write and that her writings were also published. For them it was an added accomplishment to be proud of, like skill in embroidery. There was no objection but they were not able to appreciate it, the question of encouragement did not arise at all. Days went on in an endless cycle of cooking and eating, eating and cooking. But this did not deter her. Write she must. Not neglecting her chores, after doing her duty perfectly. Now after having reached the end of a long journey, she wonders

‘How could I do it? Who egged me on? I am unable to figure how the stream of my literary life has moved on. The background has remained the same. I never went out alone. I have kept to the old system. I am not in favour of breaking old models. My only effort was to try and see if I can do anything from inside the system. If I have succeeded, I do not give myself any credit for it. It just happened.’
The path of writing had been smooth, without a hitch. As a teenager, she had sent three compositions on her own to three journals—Shishusathi, Bharatbarsha, and Ananda Bazar. She did not have to look back. Requests kept pouring in. She did not have to make any effort herself for getting published. She began her career by writing poems. But somehow readers wanted stories. ‘Struggle? No, I have not faced any from outside.’ Neither illness nor sorrow, not even deaths of those near and dear could put a stop to her onward march. If there was any struggle, she said, it was inside her. ‘How did I reach the open sea from the life of an enclosed pond?’ It is the story (p.298) of an untold struggle—how from within the four walls of an insular mindset she made her way, without breaking the walls, without destroying anything, keeping the family happy. She certainly is not the type who would beat her own drum, declare to the world how she crossed the obstacles. What could she do? Family has always been her priority, not her career. She paid great attention to the nitty-gritty of domestic details. Often, well-wishers have said leave these alone. Spend more time in writing. But Ashapurna confessed: ‘I just can’t do it. The maid who does the dishes came and sat by me and we began to chat. I can’t refuse her. It is just impossible for me to tell her to go away because I have my writing to do.’

She loves people. She is so passionately fond of them that nature is conspicuously absent in her stories. Once a smart young girl, an American researcher, who could speak Bengali well came to visit her. Ashapurna looked at her with affection. Her first question was typical, any conventional Bengali mother or aunt would have asked that.

‘What a pretty girl. You are not married?’

‘Let us put it this way. I did not marry.’

‘Oh my goodness. Why?’

‘That is a long story.’

‘A story is exactly what I want.’

Every artist picks up his or her material, the kind that suits her. ‘The material I chose,’ said Ashapurna, ‘was ordinary people, bound by the laws of society.’
They are perfectly ordinary, whose days are spent in trying to cope with the demands of everyday living. Their hostile environment is crushing them, distorting them, breaking them, tearing their desire to pieces and from behind it all a soul cries out in agony, trying to reach the unreachable. Nothing very dramatic ever happens to them, only ordinary illness, poverty or may be an accident. So the cry of their soul never becomes wild enough for others to hear. You have to strain your ears to catch the low-key (p.299) agony. It is my duty as a writer to record that soft sound of grief. This requires honesty and love. This has been my policy all along my writing career. I only talk about what touches me as feeling; I never make a deliberate effort to go for a stunt. I never step beyond the world I know.

But this known world is no less mysterious. She has felt that a lot remains unseen in a human being. What we see from the outside is not everything. Most part of this unseen segment of a man or woman is a scene of constant strife, conflict between life, and what he would try to make out of life. He does not know how helpless he is, a victim of his own self, his own emotions, his surroundings. Like a spider he is constantly weaving a web round himself, making himself his own prisoner.

A perfect example of this dilemma is a short story titled ‘Cactus’. It is the story of a young working couple who are constantly being harassed by their landlady. All of a sudden, a perfect solution presented itself. But their reactions were different. Bharati, the wife could have been the symbol of oppressed womanhood but actually it is Shishir, the husband who is the real victim of circumstances. He does not have the courage to break out of the web of his own ego.* (p.300)

Ashapurna began with short stories and moved on to novels later. She said, ‘Some questions were bothering me. There were things I wanted to say. These factors pushed me towards novel writing.’ She began to feel ‘why are women subjected to such neglect? Why should they spend their entire life in prison? Why should they be denied any role beyond looking after the home and child rearing?’ She has looked for answers in her trilogy—Pratham Pratisruti, Subarnalata, and Bakulkatha. These are much discussed novels. Many critics have discovered traces of her life in them. But Ashapurna differs. She says,

I have to be inside every character, including the chief protagonist. But that is not my outer self. How can that be? The heroine [Bakul] is unmarried. Her life is the opposite of mine. Many of my readers have claimed that Satyabati is a portrait of themselves. I am Satyabati, they confide to me.
She particularly remembers one reader who was so possessed by Subarnalata that she even forgot her own name. I am Subarnalata, she used to say. I get many letters, said Ashapurna, saying this is their story. Many write about their family problems, seeking advice. I can solve the problems of my own creations but how can I interfere with the lives of those whom God has created?

One gentleman complained that Ashapurna had peeked through his window and watched whatever goes on in his household. She has even taken down their conversations. He insisted that Ashapurna must have been their neighbour. How can you deny that, he insisted, because I am that unfortunate Shashibabu. ‘Does life mirror literature or is it the other way round? The borders often overlap. My readers are my heroines and my heroines are my readers’, says Ashapurna with conviction. (p.301)

Comments

They say R.K. Narayan after his morning cup of coffee would go for a round, meet neighbours, chat with them, stop by a shop, and gossip. Ashapurna on the other hand never stirred out of the house alone. Mohammed did not have to go to the mountain, the mountain came to him. The outside world does not knock at her door, it gatecrashes .... Her observation is equally acute, her pen as sharp, her views as transparent. Sometimes the tone is comic, often it is satiric. If one calls out for Bablu, she knows exactly how many boys of that name would come out of the lane. What happens to those thousands of lanterns that are distributed during the elections, she wonders. The big talk of politicians reminds her of the quack doctor Kiran Kabiraj and the miracle of his vocal tonic. Critics rave about some of her perfect short stories. Her stories are hardly ever action packed. They look inward, like the stories of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay or Narendranath Mitra. Some have spotted similarities with Bimal Kar or even Jyotirindra Nandi. Ujjal Kumar Majumder has talked of moments in her stories, moments that are lit by sudden revelations. Opinions have gone on evolving with time. According to some, Ashapurna is a contemporary of Moti Nandi, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay in the cruel exposure of the terrible loneliness of the human heart. (p.302)

Notes


(*) The conversation went thus:

‘Most unexpectedly Shishir said, How can you talk of moving out? After all it is only you who is getting a quarter.'
What do you mean? Is it only me? Not my son and husband? They will not be allowed to stay?

I do not know about the son. The question is the husband. They might allow him to stay but what makes you so sure that he will move in?

Will you be a little more clear?

Everything is crystal clear. I have no intention of settling in a kingdom of women.

Bharati was rendered mum. She had been visualizing a happy home but the cruel shadow of a creature of evil fell on her dreams, shattering her simple joy to pieces.'