



The short story of Ashapura Devi : the politics of Zenana

Dr. Mitali Tikader
Assistant Professor
Department of Bengali
Jiaganj College, Murshidabad

Abstract:

Human life is variegated. From the dawn of civilization, he is searching the meaning of life. He was to against family, society and state to establish his identity. But his struggle is not only with outside but with his inner soul. His inner struggle has been picturized in the literature in all languages. In the modern literature the various dimensions of the inner soul is depicted. Rabindranath is the morning star in the horaizen of Bengali literature. After him many eminent novelist and short story writers tried to depict the various dimensions of modern life, problems and existence. The two world wars manifest the uncertainty and ambiguity of our lives. The second world war demolished the value of life. Contemporary incidents, like freedom movement, boycott movement, famine (of 1350), cyclone and colonial exploitation also hammered the Bengal life. Bengali writers tried to focus these disruption in their writing. Ashapura devi is one of them.

Keywords: Politics, Zenana, Bengali Literature, Modern Life, Freedom Movement

Ashapura was born in 8th January 1909 in Pataldanga of Kolkata. She was very daredevil at childhood, but at the same time great attraction in poetry. Her mother Saralasundari was educated and her father was an artist. But she could not get conventional education mainly for the inhibition of her grandmother Nistarini Devi who was the chief of her family. So, she could not go to school or college. But this was not a barrier to her. She got many prizes by writing poems in journals. Simultaneously she begun to write short story. Her first story 'Pashapashi' appeared this time.

Rabindranath described the twin books of a woman in his poem 'Dui Nari' of 'Balaka' kavya –

Kon khone
Srijoner samudramonthone
Uthechilo duinari
atoler Sajyatol chari.
Ekjona Urvasi sundori.
Biswer kamona-rajye rani,
Swarger apsori.
Onyajona Lakshmi se Kalyani,
Biswer Janoni tanre Jani,¹

that means, at the time of chiselling the sea there came two women. One is Urvasi, who is desired by whole world, another is Lakshmi, who is the symbol of welfare and is regarded as the mother of the earth.

The same idea is found at the beginning of the novel 'Dui Bon'. Rabindranath has used two images 'Urvasi' and 'Lakshmi' to signify the two types of women. But Ashapura in her short stories depicted the eternal conflict between woman using daughter-in-law and mother-in-law or daughter-in-law and sister-in-law. She tried to explore mental bleeding of the women and showed that in most cases they are helpless in the hand of male dominated society. As for example we can use her three short stories 'Chhinnomosta', 'Taserghar' and 'Samskar'.

In the short story 'Chhinnomosta' (The person who cuts her own head) we see a happy couple Debnath, Jayabati and their only son Bimalandu. They were financially well. So, they did not bother about their son's establishment, but always fancied about son's marriage. Hundreds of nights were passed by the couple thinking the same thing. Perhaps the almighty became annoyed at their happiness. Debnath died before Bimalendu become fit to be married. The incident is a bolt from the blue. Now Jayabati alone and her whole responsibility is to select a girl for her son who is now fit to be married.

Jayabati made a list of brides. She selected bride from village as they can be tamed easily. Jayabati chosed bride from Tribeni and Hooghly because she was herself from those places. And his son Bimalendu obeyed his mother's advice as an obedient son and married Prativa. Everything was going on smoothly. But the fate smiled and the melody of life suddenly is cracked. Ashapura made a new turn of her story after his marriage.

Jayabati feels her obligation to look after her son's family in absence of her husband Debnath. She bought a beanarasi sari to welcome her daughter -in-law. But she could not welcome her as she was a widow and had to depend on her relative Kanaklata.

Jayabati wanted to show his neighbors that she what a good relation she made with her daughter-in-law which would be an example. Some mothers select ugly bride so that her son would not be fully attracted by her. But Jayabati did the opposite. She always searched a beautiful girl for her son, which may be an example for all mother-in-law.

At last, all fancies smashed and reality started. Bimalendu came home with his ninth standard educated wife. Jayabati was famous for drawing 'alpona' but in her home she could not as she was a widow. All her imaginations began to break as her daughter-in-law began to prove that she is not a village girl and would not be subordinated by anybody. Even she began to mock the financial condition, style of her husband's family. Jayabati was famous for luxuriousness. But now she was ridiculed by her daughter-in-law, who always blamed publicly. Jayabati did not get a chance to reply, but began to the annoyed. Her angers were mainly to her son who never spoke against his wife. Before sons' marriage Jayabati was eagerly waiting for his sons return from

Kolkata. But this time when Bimalendu with his wife started for his father-in-law house, Jayabati got relief. The relation between mother and son began to break.

Jayabati, the helpless widow wanted to pass her life only with her son. She wanted faith from everybody, but realized the opposite. She felt that Bimalendu is spontaneous as before. So, she told him to take his wife from father-in-law's house.

The newly-wed bride came, but yet to pay heed to her mother-in-law. Jayabati realized that her son is charmed by the 'Urvashi' image of his wife, and is not satisfied by her 'Lakshmi' image. So, she requested her to cook food.

She knew that her son was changed, but could not realize how far it was. One day Bimalendu remarked "you are being mean minded". Jayabati lost her speech. The story comes to the climax. One day when she gave a special curry to Prativa, she replied that she was not ready to eat that curry like as widow. Jayabati became stunned. She went to the payer room and prayed the almighty and felt as if He heard her prayer. Bimalendu died suddenly in an accident at Kolkata. Neighbours and the readers may think how mourned Jayabati was, but it was not so far in reality. We may think what was Jayabati prayer to her God? What is revenge of mother.

Everything was going on as usual. She called her daughter-in-law politely for eating. But we the readers hear rivaling tone of a mother-in-law for her daughter-in-law.

Ashapura Devi tried unveil the hidden truth in her stories. In the famous novel 'Chokher Bali' Rabindranath depicted the jealousy of a mother. In this short story Ashapura also pointed jealousy and lesbo of a mother to her married son. Her jealousy leads to the destruction of all the characters of the story and readers to the catastrophe.

In the short story 'Taser Ghar' we see Mamota, who is serving gladly the big joint family for long eighteen years. Her responsibility is not only for the family but also to the neighbours. Everybody loves her, even her mother-in-law regards her as an ornament of the family. Her sister-in-law is the only person who can't tolerate her and always tries to harm her.

The story starts: one morning Mamota wanted a pot to her sister-in-law to wash rice. Tarangini did not reply and wanted to know when her elder brother returned. Mamota replied that her elder brother had not come. Tarangini was astonished and told that she has heard a male voice from her room. Mamota denied and told her to do own duty. Tarangini repeated her say and squinted “I saw a shadow of two person from your room, is not true? Himi.” Himi was Mamota’s daughter. Mamota became uneasy. But disguising the truth she replied annoyance “You may have seen a ghost my dear sister. Don’t lose amulet of Ram. It will help you.” Tarangini became more curious. But she will fully did not try to clear the doubt because her wish was not to disclose the fact. Tarangini tried her best to prove the badness of Mamota’s character. She was could not tolerate Mamota’s affinity to all family members.

Nex day Tarangini’s elder brother Sudhansu returned home. After refreshment he went to service station. On the other side Mamota’s younger sister Sabita’s labour pain started, and one of her relative came to take Mamota to her. She went immediately. In the meantime, Mamota’s husband’s brother’s wife Bijoli enquired of Mamota not seeing her in kitchen, Tarangini replied “How can I say who comes in the family and when? It’s may be dangerous also.” Mamota’s mother-in-law Sushilabala came down wards and enquired of Mamota. Tarangini replied bitterly. Sushilabala supported Mamota’s work and Tarangini became more envious and angrier. In absence of Mamota all the members began to criticize her character, only Bijoli did not believe. When Bijoli tried to protest, her husband Himansu warned her and remarked that no woman cannot be believe, Tarangini, who was always envious of Mamota showed a pair of dirty garments as a proof. All family members came to a conclusion about the illicit character of Mamota.

At night Mamota returned home after the safe birth of her sister’s child, she saw her husband Sudhansu was laying in camp-cot. She thought Sudhansu might feeling huff. She requested him to go inside. He replied “I have no desire to enter the room or talk with you, please go.” Everything is now began to clear at Mamota who was completely fatigue, she understood in her absence Tarangini could prove to all that she is a slattern. Mamota understood how fragile is faith to her. She did not speak a single word. She told Bijoli the real truth. Her maternal brother Nikhilesh came to her room in the midnight to escape from police and removed his dirty garments inside the bed. Mamota did not notice at all. All people of the family took it as a proof of her libertine. Bijoli asked her to disclose the truth, but Mamota refused. She was determined to leave

the family who did not believe her identity and womanhood. Here we find in Mamota who like Mrinal of Rabindranath's short story want to leave her family to dignity her femineity. She said to her husband Sudhansu, "I am leaving your family, I want to search a place in the vast world for just a woman."

In this context we may take another short story of Ashapura. It is 'Smaskar' which shows a new dimension of father-in-law towards his daughter-in-law.

The short story starts with the return of Satyasunder to his home hearing the news of his son's death. He knew it will be inevitable because Chinmoy was ill from his very childhood. His wife Indumati also knew it. Only to fulfill his son's wish, she made him married with a beautiful girl named Purnima. Being a conscientious father Satyasunder opposed his son's marriage and left them with an oath that he would never see them in life if Cinmoy is married. So, when Satyasunder came home, his wife Indumati left the place and went to her father's house. She did not bother for his son's widow for a while, but compelled her to perform all the conduct of a widow. Here we find the same tradition of a mother-in-law towards her daughter-in-law. Then she went to her father's home. This is the first chapter of the story.

Satyasunder, the father-in-law reached home. Chinmoy's paternal aunt took Chinmoy's wife Purnima to his room. On seeing her the conscientious Satyasunder's mind began to melt. He thought the name was deserved to her beauty. But not fit to her fate. Gradually their relation became father-daughter. He announced that he would take his daughter to his working place and gave in marriage to a boy who was known to him. So, all arrangements were done, many essential items were purchased. On hearing this news one of Purnima's uncle of relation and his son came to meet them. Up to this part the paternity of Satyasunder overwhelms us. But suddenly the rhythm broke down. Satyasunder went upwards to call her. He saw that Purnima and the relative boy were standing maintaining safe distance. But Satyasunder understood their vision. At once he changed his decision. Why he did this, the writer herself emphasised "suddenly Satyasunder became highly angry." The inner fatherhood of his ancestors while watching laxity of chaste woman of own family arose in Satyasunder. Now Purnima is not his daughter, but only a widow, and he himself is a father-in-law. Getting up on the car he told Purnima's relative, "I planned to take my daughter-in-law with me, but I think it will not be right. You yourself took her with you."

But don't worry, I shall always do my duty. I shall send you her expenditure regularly." He started immediately.

Conclusion:

In all these three stories we see jealousy of different types. In 'Chinnamosta' the mother-in-law was so envious on her daughter-in-law that she could imagine her only son's death. In 'Taser Ghar' the mother-in-law could not stick up her faith on her daughter-in-law, where the husband's sister's envy smashed the family. In the story 'Samskar' the pertinacity of mother-in-law, the prejudice of father-in-law made the young daughter-in-law's life unbearable. The painful feeling of a person is represented in modern story and Ashapurna is one of them. We may think what type of character gets the compassion of the writer? Her favoritism breslows only on the distressed, downtrodden people, who may be young bride, old widow, mother-in-law anybody. She painted the picture of oppressed people, mainly woman in life long.

References:

1. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Rabindra Rachonaboli' Sastho Khondo, Kolkata, Biswabharoti , Sulabh Sanskoron, Punormudron, Pous 1410, P-274.
2. Ashapurna Devi – Golpo Somogra (Prothom Khondo), Mitra O Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Prothom Prokassh Baisakh 1406, Nabom mudron, Agrahayon 1423.
3. Nabonita Debsen (Bhumika) – Ashapurna Devir chotogolpo samkolon, Nabom punormudron 2019, National book Trust, Naya Delhi, Bharat.
4. Upasona Ghosh – Ashapurna Devi – Paschim Banga Bangla Academy – Prothom Prokash Jan 2004, Kolkata.

.....