



The Voice of Protest: Tracing Satyabati's Journey in Ashapurna Devi's Novel *The First Promise*

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Abstract

For centuries, the rigidity of tradition and convention has confined individual's autonomy and self-expression. It acts as a binding force that dictates all rules. Particularly women are the victims of this societal conventions. They are suppressed and oppressed in the patriarchal society. They have no voice in the patriarchal set-up. They are denied education and often treated as property. Many harmful social practices like child marriage, Sati, polygamy made their condition deplorable. They are sub-ordinated to their male counterparts. Many women novelists have presented a realistic picture of the plight of women. Ashapurna Devi, the prominent writer of Bengal is one among them who criticizes the patriarchal society for suppressing the voices of women. Her novel *The First Promise* portrays women's struggle against patriarchy.

The present paper attempts to explore women's oppression in the patriarchal Hindu society of colonial Bengal and also their struggle for women's emancipation. The protagonist Satyabati in the *First Promise* is bold and self-educated who refuses to remain silent. She asserts her individuality even in the face of strong opposition.

Key Words: Patriarchy, polygamy, Sub-ordination, oppression, struggle.

Ashapurna Devi's *The First Promise* is set in 19th century Bengal. The novel is the first volume of her trilogy, followed by *Subarnalata* and *Bakulkatha*. It attempts to commemorate the struggles of women in the patriarchal society so neglected by history. It explores the complexities of women's lives and the need for social reform. It serves as a powerful testament to women's rebellion against societal conventions.

Satyabati, the protagonist of *The First Promise* embodies the spirit of resistance. She represents the voice of protest against oppressive patriarchal norms in colonial Bengal. She is married off at an early age. She is intelligent and determined woman who raises her voice against social injustice and patriarchal oppression. She is fearless and rebellious since childhood. Her rebellious nature made her different from other members of her family.

In the 19th century Bengal, women were not permitted to read and write. But Satyabati knows that education is a vital tool for women's liberation. Literacy can make women independent and provide better understanding of the world. Despite social opposition, she educates herself secretly. When her father wants to know the need of education in girl's life, he is stupefied by her answer.

'What is the use of girls learning? They won't become rent-collectors or cashiers, will they?' Ramkali questioned her with an amused laugh. Once more Satya's vehemence returned . . . 'Why should they become cashiers? They'll learn to read the Ramayana Mahabharata and Puranas. Then they'd not have to keep waiting for the Kathak to come around' (131).

In the first half of the 19th century, educating women is seen as a threat to traditional values. Even they are not allowed to touch the book. There is a blind belief that women would become blind if she is allowed to touch the book. Satyabati opposes this belief and says:

‘I’d like to know what happens if a woman touches this [palm] leaf. So many women read and write in Calcutta!

Her cousin, Neru responds: ‘Who has told you that? Don’t you know they’ll all go blind if they did?’

‘How absurd! You don’t know a thing. As if they instantly become blind when they read! Nonsense!...I’m telling you Neru, nothing like that happens. Learning is a good thing. It can never be a sin to learn’ (124).

For a woman, touching the writing material is considered a sin. This patriarchal myth is created to control women, limit their power and opportunities. Satyabati challenges this discriminatory practice against women. She argues that the Hindu goddess of learning, Saraswati, is a female:

‘Why should it be a sin?’ Satya blazed forth spiritedly, ‘If it isn’t a sin when women fight and argue all day and curse away, how can it be a sin to learn? And isn’t the goddess herself a woman? Doesn’t she hold the four Vedas in her hands?’ (126).

Satya makes Neru surprised by touching the palm leaves. He tells to Punyi-pishi: ‘She touched the palm leaves we write on and she said “it doesn’t matter!”’ (125). Ashapura Devi writes:

Satya giggled and brought down a hand fan made of same leaves, from a hook on the wall, and stunned Punyi some more, ‘Here! Look, I’ve touched this! Did anything happen to my hands?’ (125)

Satyabati proves that not only does she not hesitate to touch a taal paat (palm leaf), she can even write on it. It makes her friend more surprise. She says:

Look at the way you’re fussing just because I touched the leaves. As if heaven has moved to hell! But do you know that I can write too?’

‘What?’ the boy and the girl exclaimed in unison, as if they had been knocked out with snake venom (125).

Women face severe limitations on their rights, education and social participation leading to gender inequality in 19th century patriarchal society. Their roles are only confined to the domestic spheres. They are criticised if they pursue education. Because it is seen as a direct threat to established gender norms. Satyabati’s cousin Neru and her playmate Punyabati comment when they come to know that Satyabati can compose rhymes. They say: ‘So you say you’ll make up a rhyme. Are girls supposed to do that?’ (25). Satyabati opposes this gender-stereotypes by saying:

Who said that? My foot! As if girls are unnatural and not conceived in their mother’s wombs! Do you think girls just come floating with the tide, or what? Don’t play with me if you talk like that! (25)

Satyabati dares to teach at a school for woman in Calcutta which is not permitted by the society of her time. She is always ready to justify her stand when she is criticised for her learning. Even her own husband Nabakumar does not understand her and criticises about her teaching skills, when she starts teaching in Sarvamangala Vidyalaya. He tells:

‘Are you so learned that you can teach now?’ Satya had smiled at his sarcasm, “Teaching is in my blood- I’ve taught all my life! I could start out because that’s how I was made. And my education? That will progress as I read. I do what I can’ (394).

At that time wife beating is a normal practice in the male dominated society. Satyabati is a spirited and bold minded girl who protests against domestic violence when she is just 9. Once she comes to know that a man has beaten his wife mercilessly and the wife becomes unconscious, she strongly protests it by composing verses against that man named Jatadharan. She gathers the village children and makes fun of Jatadharan comparing him to a rampaging elephant:

The Elephant-footed Jatadada – there he goes, the blighter! May a toad kick the back of this stupid wife-beater! Jata, Jata’s really gross, he’s an abuser like no other! Watch the fun, for now he’ll run, here comes the wife’s father! (31)

Satyabati is outspoken from her childhood days. She denies to call her father-in-law as Thakur, even she hesitates to touch his feet when she comes to know his ill character. She is a very broad minded and strong-willed girl. She counter attacks her husband when he says that Satyabati would lose her caste if she goes to Calcutta. She brings up a counter example of her father-in-law's sexual relationship with a lower caste woman. In their conversation:

'If a woman goes to Calcutta, what'll become of caste?'

Satya replied gravely, 'If your father can keep his caste, if he still has the right to touch the holy stone, I too shall not lose caste If I go to Calcutta'.

'Don't go on and on! It's easy for a man to remain pure, it's not the same for a woman. You'll have to drink water that is stored in leather bags.'

'I'll drink that if I have to. We'll manage the way other brahmins manage in the city (229-230).

Her desire to experience the new world outside village becomes stronger. She declares spiritedly- "I will, will, will go to Calcutta! Just to check out for myself if a woman is struck down by thunder when she steps into the city!" (230)

Satyabati goes to the British police to get proper justice for Vabini's sister Puti, a nine-year old child bride. She is murdered at the age of ten by her husband. Her only fault is that she does not allow her husband to touch her. Satyabati gravely protests for justice in front of a British policeman and says:

There are heaps of sins that have collected over centuries. If you can rid us of those, only then would I say that you deserve to be lawmakers. Why have you taken on the guise of a ruler in another's land? Why can't you just huddle in to your ships and leave? (484)

Satyabati wants to educate her daughter Subarnalata to prevent her from enduring the same fate. She wants to get her daughter married after she completes her education. But at that time a grown-up unmarried girl is considered as a bad symbol for the family. As a result Satyabati's mother in law get her granddaughter married by calling Subarnalata to spend time with her. Satyabati's most significant protest occurs when her daughter Subarna is married off without her knowledge. Her first promise to educate her daughter is shattered as her mother-in-law marries off Subarna against her wishes when she is away. She is informed about the marriage only on the same day. She is unable to stop the marriage and is devastated. Satyabati strongly opposes the marriage of her eight-year-old daughter Subarnalata. She wants her daughter back even after her marriage. Satyabati doubts her husband's promise to bring back Subarna: 'Really? You'll bring her back? You'll wipe out this doll's marriage and bring me back my Subarna?' (531) She protests by leaving her husband and family on the day of her daughter's wedding instead of participating in the ceremony. Her final act of defiance is rather a rebellion against patriarchal systems and oppressive societal norms that fail to protect women.

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