

Dipannita Dutta, *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 335 pp. ISBN 0-19-809999-1.

Ashapura Devi (1909-95) was a phenomenal twentieth century Bengali woman writer, who lived through four decades in colonial Bengal under British administration. Ashapura was a witness to the nationalist movement, she felt the tremors of the violence of the two world wars, the relentless pursuit for freedom from British rule by Gandhi, Nehru, Netaji among others and the overwhelming inspiration of Rabindranath Tagore, who endeavoured to bring the world together, breaking free from the jingoism of nationalist discourse.

Born in colonial India in 1909, self-taught Ashapura Devi went on to write two hundred and forty novels, over two thousand short stories and also sixty-two books for children, along with many essays and letters. Ashapura never went to school but became literate by merely watching and imitating her elder brother practice reading and writing as his school exercises. But unlike many Bengali girls in those days Ashapura had the privilege of having for her mother a literate middle class woman whose pastime was reading. Ashapura too became a compulsive reader but mere reading did not satisfy her. She began her literary career by publishing her first poem in the Bangla children's journal *Shishusaathi* at the age of thirteen. The editor wrote to her encouraging the young teenager to write stories for the journal. Ashapura readily agreed and thus began a literary career spanning almost seven significant decades of Bengali society and culture. Ashapura died on 13th July, 1995, having secured an undisputed position for herself as a pioneer of twentieth century Bengali women's writing. She received many awards and prizes in her lifetime including the Sahitya Akademi award and the Jnanpith award. Ashapura Devi combined in her creative psyche the tradition, trends and experiments that defined Bengali literary tradition and its evolution, spanning both colonial and post-colonial times.

Dipannita Dutta's book is well researched and adds a new dimension to our understanding of early modern Bengali women writers for whom their homes were their worlds. The home as subject of her short fiction and her novels made Ashapura a household name in Bengal. Dipannita has introduced the readers and researchers of colonial and postcolonial Bengal to the wide array of Ashapura Devi's non-fictional writing. However, apart from translations of relevant essays, conversations and sundry allied material, Dipannita has endeavoured to juxtapose biographical details of the author along with her intellectual discourse on the condition of women. The duality of the author as text and the texts by the author can be an interesting study in terms of affinities and divergences. Repeatedly, Ashapura stressed in her various essays

and conversations that familial responsibilities were primary for her. Her own writing occupied an interstitial space. She was loyal to her role as a homemaker as she was to her Muse, the Goddess Saraswati who inspired her compulsive writing

The book is divided into five broad sections each of which comprise several chapters. The first section “Silence and Its Contours” deals with the life, early marriage and familial responsibilities of Ashapura Devi. Marriage, wifehood and motherhood were roles she accepted without resistance and the impression a reader derives is that she experienced infinite freedom in her creative work, as she scripted the roles of men, women and children in middle-class Bengali domestic spaces. The second section assembles six essays and some letters dealing in general with women’s education, women’s role in society, laws for women and compares girlhood of the past and present. The third section is a series of conversations with such eminent intellectuals as Chitra Deb, Partha Chatterjee, Subhadra Urmila Majumdar, among others. In all these interactions Ashapura reiterated the oppression and voicelessness of women along with women’s own responsibilities and duties. Some added attractive features of the book are the inclusion of a chronological biography, a section from her diary and a list of English translations of Ashapura Devi’s works. These are all useful tools for researchers.

Ashapura had written in her non-fictional work, *Aar Ek Ashapura* (Another Ashapura), that she had invariably scripted the lives of imaginary women warriors and rebels. She had never been attracted to recording the lives of complacent average women who were compliant and complicit in the process of exploitation and marginalisation of women trapped within the patriarchal system. Therefore, Ashapura Devi wrote:

Whatever I have written has been within the middle class society that I had directly observed.... I haven’t written about politics, I haven’t quite written about social-activists. I have written about women within the middle-class households. But I have written about those who have not been able to accept the intolerable situations within the homes. If the situation demands-then they give up home or their husbands. All along within my mind there was an element of uncompromising rebellion, but that was never apparent. You may even call it the desire for women’s liberation. But that urge was not a personal one. It was directed towards the progress of society and the community as such. (*Aar ek Ashapura* 17; translation mine)

Dipannita Dutta has contributed an excellent text on Ashapura Devi in particular while simultaneously tracking the evolution of Bengali women’s writing from the colonial to the postcolonial times. The book will undoubtedly be appreciated by teachers and researchers of Bengali cultural studies and Bengali literature studies.

Works Cited

Devi, Ashapura. *Aar Ek Ashapura*. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1998.

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