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The First Promise: Woman's Vision of Life

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Abstract

Ashapurna Devi (1909-1995), a stalwart among Bengali writer is one of those rare authors who have rendered their voice to an entire culture to capture it's nuances with formidable insights. Her novels echo the domestic space of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal. Satya, the protagonist of the novel *The First Promise*, portrays the complex human realities present in a woman life. The *First Promise* is the first novel of her widely famous trilogy. Satya's vision of life is completely different and radical from other characters of the novel. Ashapurna Devily strong believes in the potential of a woman to gives new dimension to the inhuman, illogical beliefs and practices of traditionalists society. Her characters play an important role in projecting the history of social reforms and it's bearing on the patriarchal society. Historical consciousness of the characters provides new parameter to their lives. The novel captures the moment in history when education was conceived as ushering in the modernity. The different layers in history direct and control the life of the characters. Social reforms of nineteenth century mark significant changes in the life of characters in the novel. This paper attempts to explore how Satya views life through her parameters and blends historical changes into her life.

Keywords- *Consciousness, Tradition, History, Women of nineteenth century, Reforms*

Introduction

Ashapurna Devi's *Patham Pratsruti* translated as *The First Promise* is the first novel of trilogy that includes *Subarnlata* and *Bakulkatha (The Story of Bakul)*. It is her most widely acclaimed work for which she was awarded with the prestigious Jangam award. She did not receive formal education because her conservative family did not believed in educating girls. Tutored by her mother at home ,she learned to read and write. *The first Promise* envisages the journey of a eight year old 'child bride' as the novel's back cover describes her, from conservative Nityanandpur to city of promises Calcutta via Baruipur. Satyawati tries to rediscover herself in progressive and reformist city under British law.

Her conscious and unconscious efforts to liberate women encompass the transition of self. Satyawati witnesses a span of historical turmoil in her life and it becomes a part of her identity. At the same time, she fights and witnesses battles at personal, social land, cultural levels.

Consciousness is an awareness of one's existence. Human consciousness is a collective sense of one's existence and it's relationship with others. Consciousness implies awareness of something, and to have this awareness one must have an ideology. The novel begins with an urge to '.....repay the debts to one's grandmother and great grandmother' (1). Bakul's consciousness about the struggle of her women ancestors compels her to narrate life story of Satyawati. For Bakul, Satya is only a story as they had never met. She is a passed on history of their family. As history is passed from one generation to another, it lives in the minds of elders. History is not just account of past events found in archives. It is, in fact, an inseparable part of one's identity. According to Marcuse- "The question is not history as a science or as the object of a science but history as a mode of Being" (47).

Ramkali, father of Satya, is termed as an outcaste on returning to village after learning Ayurveda. But his wisdom and intelligence earns him respectable place in the village. Once an outcaste is now revered as God who can thwart death. Satya inherits the charm and intelligence from her father. Satya's non-feminine interest like fishing and desire to study are beyond comprehension of short-sighted women of the house. Nothing seems to deter her as she says to her father "...Huh! As if I fear the dark!" (23). Her courage eventually removes the darkness and ignorance in many women's life through education. Set up in the social milieu of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the novel portrays perfect picture of colonial Bengal which is on the path of social reforms. It presents perfect blend of European modern society and traditionalist Bengal.

Satya's life at her in-laws transforms her innocence into maturity but nothing could change her determination and outlook towards life. Her personal history gradually merges with the eventful city later in her life. Her first encounter with her mother- in- law Elokeshi leaves everyone stunned. When Elokeshi hits her for not sitting properly while tying her hair, she retorts, "why did you hit me" (186). She was not the one who could be tamed easily. Nabakumar, her husband felt the loss of "clay doll for a wife" (191). She, being the victim of child marriage, suffers miscarriage and becomes mother of two sons very soon. Her conscious defiance to prepare puja room for her father-in-law after revelation of his nightly outings from Sadudi reveals the strength of her character. It emphasises the hollowness of society which differentiate between actions of man and woman. Her desire to experience new world outside village becomes even stronger after this incidence as she declares, "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)

Arrangement of an English doctor from city by selling off her gold necklace with the help of Nitai and Bhabashab-mashai required immense courage which only Satya could have. Doctor's treatment gives life to her ailing husband. Her belief in living Gods is just a glimpse of her vision of life different from other women in the novel. She emerges as an epitome of new hopes among the women of the village. Baruipur itself feels the beginning of a new world.

Ashapurna Devi gives a peep into Indian psyche .She delineates a contrasting picture of fate of Shankari and Nilamber Banerjee, both accused of illicit relationship. Satya's father continues to have a respectable in village whereas Shankari is referred to as "unchaste woman" and "paramour". Satyawati was dissatisfied with the inhibiting roles assigned to woman. Even Sadudi longs to come back to her husband in middle age and accepts the co-wife. It was quite normal for the first wife to live peacefully with the co-wife for the pleasure of their husband. Elokeshi, Sadudi, Sharda-all the major characters accept the tradition of co-wife mutely. Sharda tries to thwart the charm of second wife by taking promise from her husband that he would not touch the new bride or else she would suicide. But gradually she also retreats herself back to the role of mistress of the kitchen.

Satya's progression towards city fills her heart with plethora of questions. She wonders if the city will accept the way she is – determined, rebellious and compassionate. Satya's leaving village for Calcutta is paradoxical for villagers-sinful yet courageous. She takes charge of everything in Calcutta so much so that her husband too feels intimidated by her strong character and feels the need of her for everything and is always in awe of her. When she dismisses Bhabatosh mashai's offer to stay with them at night on their first day in unknown city Calcutta, her husband exclaims:

"Always ready to take a risk! I wonder why god made you a woman instead of a man!"(534)

Man and power are synonyms in Indian society since ages. Satya proves that, for being able to take decision one doesn't needs to be a man by eventually taking up teaching to earn her livelihood. Her decisions are many times incomprehensible to weak-willed Nabakumar. His feminine ways and spineless character annoys Satya sometimes. It also plays havoc to the life of their daughter Subarna in the end. He always seeks shelter of someone who can hide his weaknesses From Nitai, to Bhabashab master to her wife Satya, he longs for their opinion in every matter. Satya never relies on her husband to discuss important matters regarding her life. It is either her father or master mashai to whom she seeks shelter to take decisions. Her husband is, in fact, mute whenever Satya needed him. She never finds philosophical companionship in her life.

Social upheavals in the society of nineteenth century Bengal bears a deep influence on Satya's life. Her identity begins to take a new shape in the wake of renaissance in Bengal. She idealizes the social reformists like Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar. She doesn't miss the opportunity to meet Keshabchandra Sen and gets inspired. She consciously becomes part of the reforms as she feels the

burden of paying the debt of the city. She is vigilant too so that she doesn't get lost in the pleasures of city. She refuses the idea of going to theatre to watch play as she does not want her sons to get distracted from their goal of life. Her vision is very clear as she wants her sons to be a better human being. Reforms like abolition of satipratha and purdah system, widow remarriage and woman's education is like weapons in the hand of unarmed Satya. She incorporates history in her life to instil new hopes in the life of people around her like Suhasini, Subarna, Sadhan and Saral by educating them. Strong Satyawati is disheartened to see the complacent attitude of her elder son. She is baffled to see that Sadhan does not have courage to talk to police officer who comes to enquire about complaint filed by her against in-laws of Bhabini's sister for brutally killing her. He rather runs to call master mashai. She wonders why education couldn't transform his inability into ability. This question looms large in the mind of Satya and makes her anxious too.

Education is one of the most important backdrop of novel. The novelist tries to instil fresh breeze of change, independence, determination in the life of characters who pursue it. It was the time when education was gaining popularity among the masses. Its influence is quite evident in the lives of Ramkali who leaves priesthood to learn ayurveda medicine; Satya who begins teaching illiterate women and Suhasini who becomes a senior grade teacher at Subarna's school. They all break from tradition and embrace historical changes taking place around them. Their life sows the seed of change in the colonial India whose fruits will be harvested by the future generation.

Suhasini, the young and beautiful daughter of Shankari is sole success of Satya's effort. Shankari who fled away with Nagen from Nityanandpur was living a desolated life as pan maker at affluent Dutta's family. Her encounter with Satya brings new hopes in her life. Satya is determined to bring change in the life of poor Suhasini by educating and marrying her off despite her virtual widowhood. By virtual widowhood I mean widowhood bestowed upon Suhasini by her mother to save her from the evil eyes of the society even though she is unmarried. This fact shivers Satya in disgust of Shankari. Although, she does not approve her ways, yet she decides to help her. When Suhasini in her prudence asks Satya about her whereabouts in the afternoon, Satya sees a new woman in Suhasini who could lend voice to her thoughts, a quality she had longed to see in her son, Sadhan. She sees her reflection in Suhasini and puts forth her argument: "Aren't women human?" But it's so futile! You know it's so agonizing to be a woman in our country! You will be prevented from doing an honest piece of work at every step!" (391)

Even in a deteriorating state of health, she goes to meet master mashai in the hope of Suhasini's marriage. Her hopes were on a new height as widow remarriage had started gaining acceptance in Brahmos. She emerges as a true fighter at every step of her life. Her never give up attitude makes her dream possible. She becomes successful in convincing master mashai to marry

Suhasini. But life has its own cruel ways when everything seems to be perfect. She even manages to find a little educated girl for Sadhan's marriage. Subarna's sudden marriage makes her heart bleed and leaves her shattered. Her daughter's marriage ironically foils her all efforts of changing other women's life. As we say history repeats itself, her own daughter also becomes child bride at the tender age of eight. Her whole world seems to come to standstill due to her spineless husband. The whole sense of social and historical changes tragically find no place in Subarna's life. Satya embarks on a journey of finding answers to her question. Her independent journey of self-existence begins with the tragic and traumatic end of the novel.

Ashapura Devi has foregrounded a woman's vision of life through the character of Satya. Historical consciousness of Satya arms her with the vision of enlightening people's life. The ever curious Satya embarks upon the journey towards Kashi to seek answers to her questions from her father Ramkali. Her decision to be self- dependent lays foundation for the road "fit for chariot" (2) on which Bakuls of modern era are smoothly running.

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