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Mothers and Daughters: Reclaiming the Besieged Body of Woman in Ashapura Debi's Trilogy

By Subhadeep Ray¹ and Goutam Karmakar²

Abstract

This paper offers a close reading of the intergenerational trilogy by Ashapura Debi, one of the first-canonized women-novelists of post-independence India: *Pratham Pratisruti* (*The First Promise*), 1965, *Subarnalata*, 1967, and *Bakul Katha* (*Bakul's Story*), 1974. Reconstituting a history of almost two centuries and countering the colonial/postcolonial grand narratives, these novels act as a saga of Bengali Hindu lower and middle-class women's plight under and resistance against a patriarchal social order operating at the most intimate levels of domestic relationships. Ashapura Debi's treatment of the intricacies of gender inequality and a woman's response to the violence inflicted on her body in one of the centres of South-Asian modernity and its vicinity intervenes crucially in the twentieth century feminist discourse. At the same time, her narrative closely follows a promise, accompanied by a sense of commitment and responsibility, handed over from mother to daughter to granddaughter to rise as self-conscious individual subjects by overcoming personal and social reservations and taboos. This paper, therefore, examines the micro-physics of power exercised in gender relations as evident in the concerned trilogy. It focuses on the performing bodies of women amidst all sorts of physical and psychological oppressions and how they provide a critique of the broader aspects of social change, like reform and nationalist movements. While considering the intersections between the poststructuralist gender studies in the West—developed as a sustained critique of the mechanism of modern power being proposed by Michel Foucault among others—and Ashapura Debi's observations, this paper theoretically emphasizes how the factors of

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contingency in Bengali women's lives posit new insights into what, after Judith Butler, may be called "gender trouble" as they undo many of the morally ordered gender roles.

Keywords: Ashapura Debi, Violence, Body, Performativity, South Asian feminism

Introduction: The Familiar is Political

Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth was published in two volumes in 1897¹, and in his editorial preface, William Knight writes rather dismissively:

All the journals contain numerous trivial details, which bear ample witness to the "plain living and high thinking" of the Wordsworth household—an in this edition, samples of these details are given—but there is no need to record all the cases in which the sister wrote, "To-day I mended William's shirts", or "William gathered sticks", or "I went in search of eggs", etc. etc. (qtd. in Kimber, 2021)

An interesting story concerning the problematic relationship between the writer, the editor, and the reader follows. Next to Knight's above remark in the margin of Katherine Mansfield's personal copy, the following words are found to be scribbled: "There is! Fool!" (Kimber, 2021). Mansfield's sharp refusal of Knight's reservation regarding Dorothy's inclusion of all the details of daily life shifts the attention to those very performances that link ontological queries and epistemological self-reflections within the feminist discourse. Marginalization of women being a global phenomenon incites a counter-movement on a global scale that recognizes the politics of the intimate and familiar relationships. Simultaneously, as Peace A. Medie and Alice J. Kang argue,

dominant scholarships on women, gender and politics, produced mostly but not exclusively by Western feminists and other scholars in the Global North, needs to examine a broader range of variables that may be independent and interactive causes of gender inequality and discrimination against women. (2018, p. 38)

Thus, in the case of a woman, devoid of Dorothy's type of socio-cultural upbringing and positioned in the post/colonial hinterland of South-Asia, it is through a dense network of repetitive *trivial* performances that the body is gendered, and any attempt to subvert any norm of the 'socially acceptable' set of performances is treated with disciplinary coercion. The trivia is also being energised by a self-conscious female subject in order to interrogate what Michel Foucault refers to as the "microphysics of power" (2008, p. 33) and participate in resisting the institutionalised regulations of the female body. That the enacting of the personal and familiar domestic world by anonymous women turns it into the political is succinctly suggested by one of the first canonised woman-authors of Independent India, Ashapura Debi (1909-1995)² in the author's preface to the first novel of her intergenerational trilogy, which is a saga of the plight of Bengali woman, *Pratham Pratisruti (The First Promise)*, 1965³, *Subarnalata*, 1967, and *Bakul Katha (Bakul's Story)*, 1974:

The history of times past is made up of stories about the rise and fall of the public world. And that restless, clamorous history written against a backdrop of light and darkness holds out inspiration, ardour and excitement for the future. But is not the mute, domestic space similarly

broken and built? From which flows forth the changing colours of a community, an age, and people's mentalities? (2004, p. xxxix)⁴

The present paper offers an engaged reading of the above trilogy, which, as a seminal literary text of the post-WWII South-Asian women's writings, focuses on the intersecting experiences of mothers and daughters of patriarchal oppression and violence. Ashapura's work anticipates the recent examinations of how violence and the threat of violence in a patriarchal society constrain the actions of women, harming the victims and benefiting the correlative privileged social groups. The trilogy in question demonstrates how women as a group are not only oppressed materially through violence, but there is always a credible, psychologically operating threat of greater harm, effectively transmitted to their physical and mental beings by obvious hurts – such as social ostracism of female kin (Cudd, 2006). Simultaneously, the trilogy focuses on the changing means, causes, and effects of women's interrelated rebellions and self-explorations towards empowerment over generations from within the domain of intimate relationships, set against a huge canvas of the rise and fall of colonial and early post-colonial social institutions. In the course of its epic journey, Ashapura's narrative covers the crucial phases of the establishment of British imperial rule, followed by the introduction of English education, displacing the Persian and native codes of teachings, and the Western medical system in place of the indigenous treatments, social reforms, diverging nationalist struggles with their iconic nation-mother correlations, the turn of the century women's movements culminating in the formation of women's organisations like the All India Women's Conference in 1927, the independence and accompanying catastrophes, and the initial hopes and despairs of India as a nation-state.⁵ The three concerned novels thus provide three interlocked but independent reflections on a long course of history. They reconstitute the cultural modernity of Bengal, in particular, and the sub-continent, in general, by prioritizing women's experience to explore the micro-politics of gender relations and gender oppressions. Ashapura Debi's inscription of "the nerve-racking stresses and strains of day-to-day living" (Rangra, 1989, p. 71) in her texts forms her specific contributions to South-Asian feminist thought.

Ashapura Debi's radical intervention in the Bengali literary culture is characterized by a self-reflective narrative stance, in which the successor mirrors the precursor and vice versa, and they are mutually committed to each other by an emotional, physical, and intellectual bonding. Thus, the first novel that is centered around the character of Satyabati significantly opens with a disclaimer on the part of the third-person narrator, that she came to know about Satyabati's story only from the notebook of Bakul, who is Satyabati's granddaughter. Bakul, a reputed author of new India in the third book, is in quest of a self-realization that may relate her back to her grandmother through her mother, Subarnalata. Given these factors of intertextuality, Ashapura Debi's own aesthetic involvements can be addressed in terms of asking "the 'absent' women's question" (Chowdhury, 1998, p. 47) through the postcolonial lens. This study wishes to understand this constitution/re-constitution of the 'I' through active interactions between mothers and daughters, who challenge the very disciplinary laws they are subjected to, across time and space. This paper applies the poststructuralist concept of performativity in relation to the gendered body, as proposed most prominently by Judith Butler. In the author's introduction to *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes:

[T]he "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the "I" becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer

incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this “I” fully recognizable. (2004, pp. 3-4)

A central performative effort of Ashapura's heroines is to narrate the history of their present, which, in the cases of Satyabati and Subarnalata, is forcefully eliminated by the grand narrative. Bakul's emergence as a writer suggests her engagement with a long-cherished dream of her mother, aunts, and grandmothers. Bakul's preoccupations mirror those of the author, who confirms in an important interview: “I chose to reveal the truth of my life, I feel partially, in the form of my creative writing” (Rangra, 1989, p. 75). This ‘truth’ interrogates the viability of extensively wide-ranging and diverging positions like the post-Cartesian “rejection of the body as an obstacle to pure rational thought” (Shildrick & Price, 1999, p. 2), Indian religious ‘sanctity’, the interface between taboos against the reproductive body in indigenous cultures and the colonial anxiety over the ‘native’ hygiene, and the post-colonial radicalism to free both body and mind by throwing off the shackles of social orthodoxy. This paper is organized around readings of three novels in two interrelated sections, and it draws upon socio-cultural histories to contextualize the different aspects of Ashapura Debi's treatment of society, sexuality, violence, and the body. This is due to the fact that the globally sensitive positions of feminism and gender studies must be realized through critical evaluations of localized representations of misery and might in the survival strategies of women belonging to a community culture. In India, in particular, social discrimination has outweighed the survival strategies of women throughout the centuries. In this context, Ashapura Debi sets the agenda for Indian feminism in respect of the socio-cultural forces of her own history in the following terms:

I believe, there were various changes taking place from outside and there are drastic changes in society. But in order to give proper respect and honour to the women folk many more basic changes in the society are required. (Rangra, 1989, p. 73)

Pratham Pratisruti: Rise of a Defiant Mother

In *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen emphasizes *real-life* experiences as the foundational component in social understanding:

“Institutions and rules are, of course, very important in influencing what happens, and they are part and parcel of the actual world as well, but the realized actuality goes well beyond the organizational picture, and includes the lives that people manage—or do not manage—to live” (2004, p. 18).

In terms of the above observation, Ashapura Debi's fiction unfurls the uncut versions of ordinary women's lives in Bengal, using all the resources history holds out to her, and raises disturbing questions regarding women's dignity, freedom, and justice that tend to subvert any of the metaphysical idealizations of *matrisama*—mother-like, *sarbangsahā*—all-enduring, and ‘pure’ woman. In his reading of Rabindranath Tagore's novelistic take on the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Bengali ideological clusters, *Chaturanga (Quartets)*, 1915-16, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay points out that “the binary opposition between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’—the binary staple to nearly all colonial discourses—covers up” many overlapping zones “by positing a causal connection between *hegemony* and *repression*” (2012, p. 47). Decoding these connections across conventional binaries, Ashapura Debi's narrative presents the characters as performing bodies, which are not simply aspects of nature, but effects of the complex

workings of power. But, in contrast to the Foucauldian account in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *History of Sexuality* (1979) of the shift from “the body as the object of penal repression” to “more subtle and implicit techniques for its normalization” (Turner, 2012, p. 68), an epical novel like *Pratham Pratisruti (The First Promise)* offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between violence and surveillance. It needs to be remembered that while the Western understanding of social censorship is interlinked with industrial modernization, printing technology, and reformation movements, in the colonial context, no such linear shift can be traced from the “traditional” to the “modern” forms of censorship. Furthermore, again moving beyond Foucault’s explanation of the “political technology of body” (1977, p. 24), that is, the means by which “discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies”, or “‘docile’ bodies” (1977, p. 138), the novel revises the very process whereby regulatory norms achieve materialization of their control over subject bodies. Such a narrative strategy thus exposes what Butler explicates about the “forcible reiteration” of regulatory norms: “That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is compelled” (1999, p. 236). This critical evaluation of the process of materialization of power enables Ashapura to use her writing as an act of revolt, as stated by her: “All those unpronounced protests of mine have appeared in my writing and in figures of rebellious women, like Satyabati of *Pratham Pratisruti*” (qtd in Dev Sen, 1997, p. xiv).

Because women’s bodies are inextricably linked to disciplinary attempts to “form” and “mean” them over time, it is the same “bodies that matter” – to use the title of Butler’s (1996) seminal text—once they explore the scopes of “unsanctioned” acts,⁶ which are performed as an offshoot of constantly repressed desires. In this manner, the bodily actions of marginalized women⁷ engage the contingent and micro-level intricacies of experience. Satyabati’s grandaunt Mokshada, a childless widow since childhood, personifies ritualistic sanctity, and, is shown to have been practicing all the taboos, codes, and conducts most strictly and severely harshly to any other woman failing to be so stringent in following the conventional Hindu norms. The same Mokshada, turning into a shadow of her former self at the end of her life, discovers the frailty of her domestic authority, built on a series of compromises. Mokshada even steals fried fish—a food-item Bengali Hindu widows are prohibited from eating—from the kitchen. As Jasodhara Bagchi notices, the narrative is centrally preoccupied with “Satyabati’s search for a viable alternative” (2004, p. XII) to the life she is offered, but this search interacts with a great range of actions around her. Satyabati’s activities are affected by others’ activities, as well as affected by others’ activities; and it is this capacity to affect and be affected by others that establishes Satyabati as an individual subject. There is no narrative blueprint for her vulnerability and resistance to social oppression. As she shifts from finding a “way of inhabiting social structures” to seeking “oppositional spaces and ‘pathways’ to empowerment” (McNay, 2016, p. 45), she has to repeat her searches all over till her death in a distant land. Therefore, the relation between body, violence, and resistance in Satyabati’s story is to be seen within the symbolic structure through which she and her fellow beings form their self-identities. Ashapura’s textuality treats the myriad ways power operates, even at the level of individual relations, which often challenges the universalizing tendencies of socio-cultural, political, and economic institutions. Her narrative critically engages itself with the ways ‘I’ is, in Jacques Derrida’s words, “comprised and determined in advance by the fact that it belongs to the most suspended ‘we’” (2005, p. 77) to find what is out of joint in intriguing relationships between individuals’ self-entities and social determination.

In *Pratham Pratisruti*, the first notable encounter between an individual’s body and tradition in a violent way involves the problematic construction of masculinity. Being ruthlessly beaten by his father for questioning the ritual of offering food and water to God when there is no proof of the divine acceptance of them, Ramkali Chatterji, Satyabati’s father, leaves

home at a very young age to find shelter in the household of an indigenous medical practitioner who grooms Ramkali to become a renowned Ayurvedic doctor. Sumit Sarkar points out that “the internal conflicts that ensue” in a number of male characters in Tagore’s novels, suggest a journey “through self-examination and auto-critique, towards a non-instrumentalized recognition of the autonomy of the Other” (2002, p. 121). In this respect, Ashapura Debi’s postcolonial re-writing of the colonial Bengali feudal and middle-class Hindu male’s shifting approaches to Others – in forms of race, caste, religion, class, and gender—provides an alternative ‘non-instrumentalized’ commentary on the dualities of colonized masculinity. Ramkali, in particular, is characterised by a constant swing between his role as a conventional patriarch—the head of a large family—and, to use Derrida, Ramkali’s “avowal of the opposite”, and his “confession of an error that is not foreign to the truth” (2005, p. 50). Thus, Ramkali, as an orthodox father, performs *gauridaana*⁸ by marrying his only daughter off when she is still a kid, but, simultaneously, he not only convinces her in-laws to allow his daughter to stay at her parental home till puberty, but also permits Satyabati to live a ‘tom-boy’ type of life by overcoming inhibitions in private and public spheres. For enjoying her relative liberty, Satyabati is, however, frequently threatened with the dire consequences of future rejection by her in-laws. The relationship between the father and the daughter develops into a sort of friendship silently maintained by mutual protection and understanding. But it is occasionally unbridled by Satyabati’s growingly eloquent protest against injustice to her fellow village women.

Satyabati’s gradual coming to sense how regulative orders “determine socially acceptable behaviour for two binary genders, structuring the repertoire for gender performance, and coercing compliance” (Threadcraft, 2016, p. 218) is, however, possible through her participation in actual events. An example from the first part of the narrative would explain her growth as a conscious individual subject. Beating wives over silly matters is considered a natural right of husbands in the countryside, Satyabati inhabits, but when her cousin, Jata, kicks his wife, the latter is knocked to the ground and turns senseless. Receiving the news Satyabati hurries to inform her father, who is on his way back home from some neighbouring village:

“[...] when Jatada’s wife was sitting down to eat, just after she’d finished the cooking, Jatada asked for a paan. His wife said that there wasn’t any paan. [...] He gave her a good hard kick on her backside. And she fell on her face in the courtyard –’ Satyabati burst into laughter” (Debi, 2004, p. 17-18).

Satyabati’s impulsive mockery of another woman’s suffering makes her a part of the vulgar act of violence, and, it is to be noted that she is chided by her father, whose ethical and philanthropic sides are derived from his profession and have affinities with the early nineteenth-century social reformers. Satyabati’s timely intervention saves the victim’s life, as Ramkali brings the victim to sense. In a dramatic reversal of the narrative, Ramkali, too, learns from his daughter about a profound reality of rural women’s experiences in colonial Bengal. Common villagers, including Satyabati, are confirmed that Ramkali has the power to bring the dead back to life, and when Ramkali tries to correct such a misconception, his daughter reveals a startling fact:

Even god can’t do a thing if you die, do you understand? Jata’s wife hadn’t died.’

[...]

But then Baba, if you hadn’t felt her pulse and given her the “essence of gold”, Jatada’s wife would have remained like that – lifeless! And then

they'd have put her on a bamboo bier and cremated her! (Debi, 2004, p. 23)

Satyabati's observation of the dubious status of the body of Jata's wife as both belonging to an individual and a sort of public property looks forward to Butler's thesis in *Undoing Gender*:

"The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us ... to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where, "doing" and "being done to" become equivocal" (2004, p. 21).

The reach of the nineteenth-century colonial modernity in India was greatly controlled within the production of the colonial ethnography itself, marked by, as Kamlesh Mohan notices,

a coherent, intelligible, though distorted picture of the colonial society, whose members had to be controlled, enslaved, and conditioned to perceive themselves as communal and religious entities, their languages, science, literature and cultural traditions as gifts from the manly, intellectually superior, materially advanced and culturally dynamic Europe" (2014, p. 59).

In this context, the social reform movements, concerning female sexuality, were filtered by the traditional authorities of the institutions of family and religion. In the words of Jasodhara Bagchi "[o]ne of the major sources of control over women's lives are the injunctions contained in the religious scriptures. In India these formed the bases of Personal Laws, with which the state arbitrated over women's legal rights" (1995, p. 8). In *Pratham Pratisruti*, the sexuality of nineteenth century rural and mostly illiterate Bengali Hindu women is the object of fundamental prohibition, whose transgression is judged as deadly offensive and treated with ritual atrocities. These women are shown to be threatened mainly by widowhood and co-wifery, and their bodies are brought under absolute social control through the cyclic experiences of motherhood. The narrative interest lies in exposing how the enacting of these social customs by these women constitutes their vulnerability. The mental violence imposed by the *kulin*⁹ Brahmin practice of polygamy is shown in the novel from the perspectives of the concerned husbands' first wives. The vicious cycle of the patriarchal law is suggested when Ramkali tries to stop a marriage ceremony, as he detects the groom to be dying. But the situation turns further critical for, according to Hindu custom, once the *lagna*—or the sacred period of the rituals of wedding—is over, the bride is bound to remain unmarried for her life. The girl instantly becomes an easy victim of social torture, and even an aged Brahmin of the village offers to marry her on that very day. Ramkali holds himself accountable for the entire calamity in the bride's family, and decides to marry his nephew, Rashu, who is already married, off to the same hapless girl, Patli. It is only later that Satyabati makes her father aware of the kind of humiliation and physical distress his action has invited for Sarada, Rashu's first wife. At her in-laws' home, Satyabati befriends her mother-in-law's niece, Saudamini, who is reported to have been abandoned by her abusive husband. Under constant social pressure, the steadfast Saudamini turns compliant and tricks to find shelter at her husband's home in Calcutta in exchange for nursing her ailing co-wife. Saudamini's husband, on the other hand, accepts his first wife because he finds her healthier than his second wife, who turned ill after a series of child births. Going against the grain, Ashapurna's narrative undermines the colonial

discursive binary between the village and the metropolis and shows how the Bengali middle-class family manoeuvres even the urban space to exploit and enjoy women's bodies. Furthermore, "Satyabati's own steady decision of going to her marital home prematurely is another instance of abhorrence at the prospect of a co-wife" (Bagchi, 2004, p. XI).

In her marital household, a mature Satyabati is found to perform her role as an obedient daughter-in-law, as when she takes care of her father-in-law, Nilambar Banerji, after he becomes paralyzed. However, she does not let her domestic propriety dismantle her own sense of right and wrong, and the strength of her character incurs both wrath and fear among her family members. So, she declares that she will not touch her father-in-law's feet when she discovers his womanizing and tactical acceptance of this by her mother-in-law, Elokeshi: "Surely, duty isn't about displaying respect even when one is feeling deeply disrespectful inside!" (Debi, 2004, p. 225). Bold Satyabati does not succumb to her parents-in-law's threat to leave the home. Elokeshi's pleas for her husband and her abuses of Satyabati show that women follow an unspoken rule that moral lapses in men can be forgiven:

[...] She's nothing but a vile, venomous snake! [...] A respectable man like him was ready to kill himself after hearing her taunts. Sadu [or Saudamini] felt the urge to rush to Satya and plead, 'Quickly beg forgiveness if you know what's good for you!' [...] Satya would not bend even if god himself descended from heaven and implored. (Debi, 2004, p. 227)

As the third person narrator confirms, instead of supernatural being, Satyabati prayed "to the living gods she knew" (Debi, 2004, p. 287). "Gender is", as Butler's reasoning informs, "a regulatory norm, but it is also one that is produced in the services of other kinds of regulations" and "sexual harassment codes," consisting of the systematic mistreatment of women by men in places like family (2004, p. 53). But, in carving out a self that does not always conform to patriarchal regulations, one is not expected to reject completely the very world in which she finds herself as an active agent. In her fictional mapping of women's struggles against patriarchal violence, Ashapura Debi thus draws on the complex relationship between the domestic world of repression and torture and the public sphere of social reforms that, at least to a certain extent could enable men enthusiasts to address the practical sides of women's sufferings. If Satyabati is one of the "unnamed women" in history who "set out to search for answers" (Banerjee Chakravorty, 1998, p. 288) to the gross inhumanity they experience, the journey of Ashapura's protagonist particularly finds two signposts, who establish the relationship between the home and the world: Ramkali, representing the traditional knowledge system, and the village English teacher, Bhabatosh Biswas, with his metropolitan affiliations. While her father adds fuel to Satyabati's aspiration to read and write—something that prepares her for participating in the nineteenth-century emancipation movement in her later career—Bhabatosh becomes a steady inspiration behind some of her iconoclastic steps. Satyabati's radical intervention in the traditional attitude toward the body is first signalled by her arrangement of a sahib doctor to treat her sick husband, Nabakumar. And, notwithstanding affliction and resentment, Satyabati forces her husband to shift from their joint family in the native village to a nuclear family in Calcutta and find a government job, mainly under the influence of Bhabatosh. This seminal journey is further intertwined with different stages of Satyabati's motherhood.

According to Indira Chowdhury, "we are better to understand *Pratham Pratisruti* if we consider infanticide, abandonment and consequent motherless as a metaphoric complex that holds much of the plot together" (1998, p. 49). Chowdhury further points out how "Satyabati is literally rendered motherless when she gives birth to her son" as her own mother's death is

announced by Elokeshi in a matter-of-fact tone with the statutory caution that she must not eat fish for the short mourning period (1998, p. 49). At this crucial moment, Satyabati feels a sense of guilt for ignoring her mother, and her own attempt to perform *differently* her motherhood takes recourse to metropolitan modernity as offering liberation through education. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler confronts Julia Kristeva's 'reification' of maternity for "[b]y relegating the source of subversion to a site outside of cultural itself, Kristeva appears to foreclose the possibility of subversion as an effective or realizable cultural practice" (1990, p. 119). The culturally subversive potentials of Satyabati's maternal strategies are to be understood in terms of the extent of the tragedy she undergoes within a vindictive order. The patriarchal agency sets the most wicked design to diminish her aspirations, which are able to constitute what Butler calls "an open assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences" even within the available cultural system and does not always show "obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (1990, p. 22). Satyabati's vehement efforts enable her sons, Sadhan and Saral, to join the educated urban middle class of the second half of the nineteenth century, but the emancipation of their mind is curtailed by the collusion between tradition and modernity to turn them suspicious of their 'dominating' mother. Subarnalata, Satyabati's daughter, represents a new hope for the mother, whose ambition is to groom her promising child in the image of the 'new woman'. When Satyabati teaches little Subarnalata alphabet, Saudamini warns her that one is "forbidden to touch books before age five", but Satyabati's reply suggests how she repeats the available symbolic codes with strategic differences: "That's a rule for boys. There are no such rules for girls. After all, she wouldn't even be allowed to do the *hathe-khari*¹⁰ ritual" (Debi, 2004, p. 458). Arriving in Calcutta, Satyabati also performs the role of a surrogate mother of another girl, named Suhash, who is the illegitimate daughter of a distant relative of Satyabati, Shankari. Shankari, who elopes with her lover to end up in a rich household at the heart of the city as a cooking maid and single mother, invents a story of the early widowhood of her extremely beautiful daughter in order to protect Suhash from her lustful employers. As the turn of events brings Suhash under Satyabati's care, the adamant and ill-mannered girl grows up into an intelligent learner. Suhash ultimately marries Bhabatosh, who later becomes a Brahmo, and turns into a successful teacher, that is, truly a 'new woman'. Subarnalata, on the contrary, is forcefully snatched from Satyabati by Elokeshi and Satyabati's husband, Nabakumar, who, a weakling, arranges another *gauridaana* during the eight-year-old Subarnalata's short visit to her village home and in the absence of her mother: "They had carried in the bride and placed her on the groom's lap. [...] The rebellious bride had tripped in her attempt to escape" (Debi, 2004, p. 519). As Subarnalata meets the common fate of numerous girl children in contemporary Bengal, her mother, with a last stroke of defiance, leaves her homeland. The narrative ends with a suggestion that a meaningful mother-daughter relationship is impossible in the historical context it charts, but the spectre of Satyabati, with her agony and longing, continues to haunt a series of daughters and granddaughters in the subsequent volumes of the trilogy, telling of a changing history of Bengali women.

Subarnalata and Bakulkatha: Nation, State, Family, Daughter, and Granddaughters

In contrast to a tendency to generalize women's condition within feminist discourses, postcolonial feminist scholars are particularly attentive to the situatedness and context-specific understanding of women's subjecthood, and the external and internal processes acting directly upon a community living to shape gender identities, in contrast to many hegemonic discourses on colonial relations. For instance, in her biography of Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (1858–1922), a pioneer in the women's emancipation movement in India, Uma Chakravarti discloses how male-centric works by talking about "the feminization of the colonized male in relation to the colonizing male" *reduces* "gender to a representational phenomenon rather than a material and ideological arrangement" (2013, p. xv). On the other hand, any discursive appreciation of

the “evocation of nation as mother”, and particularly a poor mother, for it “encompassed an inculcation of the ethic of *mota chal* and *mota kapar* (coarse, simple rice and thick, homely cloth)”¹¹ and thereby invited “subordinated and marginalized groups to take part equal part in nationalist rituals” (Bose, 2017, p. 13), somehow underrating the circumstantial and other constraints Bengali non-elite women were subjected to as well as their resistance against socio-economic deprivation even within an embattled household through history. The sequels of *Pratham Pratisruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bakulkatha*, give new meaning to the relationships between the country, state, family, and citizens in a new way. The materiality of her fictional project is suggested by the author in unambiguous terms:

Subarnalata is the story of a particular time, a time that has passed, but whose shadow still hovers over our social system. *Subarnalata* is a symbol of the helpless cry of an imprisoned soul ... sociologists write down the history of a changing society and I have merely tried to draw a curve to depict the change” (qtd in Dev Sen, 1997, p. vii).¹²

The novel presents a bleak narrative of a community living together that desperately resists any social change inside the home while adjusting itself to the upheavals in the outside world. This textual strategy is noted by Naina Dey, who notes that “[s]tanding at the crossroads of time, when the history of the world was fast changing”, Ashapura Debi concentrates “essentially on the family, especially on the women in the family” (2007, p. 222), and this kind of narrative exposes how the rays of social change are reflected and refracted by the domestic space.

In Rabindranath Tagore’s novella *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)*, 1934, the central woman character, Ela, reflects on why Bengali mothers-in-law are found to be torturing their respective daughters-in-law, and argues that those who know themselves as internally weak treat their weaker subjects in the cruelest manner and desperately try to maintain the power structure in such a way that the frail authority they exercise is never exposed. *Subarnalata*’s interaction with this dynamic is direct and violent since the day of her wedding, as noted in the last section. Much later, her daughter, Bakul, remaining unmarried after a heartbreaking love affair, reviews in *Bakulkatha* how terrible conditions are attached to a sense of futility in the institution of marriage in respect of her mother and grandmother:

‘Why is marriage so irrefutable? Why can’t one break it?’ Bakul’s maternal Grandmother Satyabati had left her husband and children, her familiar world for the light of the greater world, driven by this quest. ... *Subarnalata* ... had been married off in the most clandestine way when she was only nine, a ritual performed by her own paternal Grandmother, Satyabati’s mother-in-law. ‘I don’t call it MARRIAGE! It’s all but a child’s play!’ Satyabati had revolted. (Debi, 2021, p. 304)

Bearing the stigma of being deserted by her own mother, *Subarnalata* becomes an object of enduring reproach, and the unbearable rule of her mother-in-law, Muktakeshi, in the family derives from a past struggle to bring up eight children single-handedly. As Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty explains, “[...] the mothering of male children with a modicum of power that is so fragile that it requires fierce protection and subterfuge, and the need to create discord between family members to prevent insurgency” (1998, p. 290). *Subarnalata*’s entrapment is completed by her husband, Prabodhchandra Chatterji, who is physically attracted to his wife but finds himself incompatible with her indomitable interest in a larger world. Prabodh tries to get rid of his anxieties by thrashing his wife and chastising her, and these acts are followed by prolonged emotional blackmail meant to force *Subarnalata* to satisfy her husband’s desires and

simultaneously maintain the family peace. Subarnalata's exposition of her spouse's character throws light on a critically overlooked side of colonized masculinity in the turn of the century Calcutta, that is, the center of the South-Asian Enlightenment: he is like a "python, which wraps its cold body around his victim, and soon its caress begins to feel like shackles of iron cutting into the flesh. This embrace crushes the insides of the victim while keeping the external appearance intact" (Debi, 1997, p. 124). The portrait of domestic violence against women in *Subarnalata* thus becomes comparable with the much more organised form of criminality practised by the colonial masters¹³. Another powerful strategy adopted to control Subarnalata's physical vitality—or her energy to disobey the family norms—seems to contain her within the *anturghor*, the room for childbirth. The narrative shows how the "maternal body" is a "consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of itself and the law of its desire" (Butler, 1990, p. 125). Subarnalata's domain of activities helps us to "understand the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially hegemonic" (Butler, 1990, p. 179; emphasis in the original), and, therefore, her unsanctioned activities interconnect corporeal and social liberation.

Subarnalata's confrontation with her in-laws' family is mainly three-fold: her sustained interest in education, her problematic involvement in the contemporary Swadeshi movement, and her effort to re-appropriate her role as a mother. It is in *Bakulkatha* that her husband retorts when their daughter Bakul is seen carrying a couple of books by Rabindranath Tagore:

"These books...the root of all evil! Good Lord, three generations of women with the same disease! I heard your grandmother had it, and your mother, I know, was the most affected with it [...] and now her daughter, too [...] what a nuisance!" (Debi, 2021, p. 31).

As this 'disease'—often received also as a type of insanity—connects mothers and daughters over space and time, it becomes a powerful medium to contest the normative "process of materialisation that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface" (Butler, 1999, p. 239). In *Subarnalata*, especially, the relentless pursuit of knowledge involves a differently performing body. Subarnalata befriends a next-door woman, to whom she gives signals by tapping on the wall and smuggles books from her through a hole in the wall. Subarnalata's attempt to collect books from a generous person by employing a teenage boy as a medium between them, however, proves disastrous as she is accused of having an adulterous affair. Subarnalata does leave the house in protest, but only to return as her father expresses his inability to give her shelter on account of social stigma. Suchorita Chattopadhyay further points out that:

"[a] motive which is intricately woven into the entire fabric of the narrative is the dream of a balcony, a *baranda* (verandah), which would usher in a breath of fresh air to counter the stale claustrophobic atmosphere of the household" (2012, p. 87).

The victimisation of Subarnalata under domestic tyrannies against a background of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century cultural modernity informs the unresolved equations between the customary laws of Hindu families and statutory laws. Ironically, restrictions imposed on Subarnalata's struggles to read and write seem to defy Satyabati's emancipating activities, about which Subarnalata comes to know through a letter from her mother only after the latter's death:

“I started a school for girls soon after my arrival here [in Varanasi] When I first started, I had to beg people to send their girls. Now a lot of people bring their daughters voluntarily. The need to educate women has begun to be felt by many” (Debi, 1997, p. 160).

The French feminist Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1973/1976), translated into English almost a decade after the publication of *Subarnalata*, theorizes the indispensable connection between writing, history, and the body:

Women must write herself: must write about woman and bring woman to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (1976, p. 875).

Subarnalata’s wish to turn her experiences and feelings into a book materializes when a distant brother-in-law of hers, Jagu, opens a private press, and secretly agrees to print her writing. The text thus produced, however, incites a stream of rebukes, leading the author to burn all the poorly published copies into ashes. The incident serves as a commentary on the close bond between the advent of modernity and printing in Bengal. It is Bakul who finally attempts to revive her mother’s manuscript but fails.

Uma Chakravarti draws the attention of South-Asian feminists to a set of questions: “[...] in what way did the new laws of the colonial state affect women and how was this similar or different for men? Did the colonial state regard women as its direct subjects or as mediated through the family?” (2013, p. 159). In this connection, *Subarnalata* narrates multiple layers of patriarchal adjustments. The male adults of Subarnalata’s marital family are depicted to be either employed in colonial administration or engaged in trade; and they consider the British as the natural masters of Indians, while never allowing the *nabya*,¹⁴ introduced by colonial modernity, to disturb the domestic hierarchies. Arrangements are thus made to allot women, except a few, in Sumit Sarkar’s phrase, “non-existent, at best marginal” place “in these new public spaces and urban spectatorship” (2014; p. 308). Thus, when Subarnalata actively responds to the call of the Swadeshi movement by mobilising the family kids to gather foreign clothes and set fire to them, her performance unsettles the public-private intercourse:

“One of the children replied, ‘We are destroying the symbol of oppression. We’ll stop wearing these stupid English garments [...]’ Prabhas: ‘Fighting the British, are you? And who is your leader? Your mother? Very well, then why is she still indoors? ... Let me go and inform the Viceroy he is about to lose his job!’” The narrative confirms that the “sarcasm” in her brother-in-law’s comment cannot “upset Subarnalata at all” (Debi, 1997, p. 75).

Subarnalata’s direct interactions with the contemporary political revolt become possible when she meets a young revolutionary at the residence of a mostly neglected sister-in-law, whose exceptional character establishes a life-long friendship between these two women. This “thin, ugly, unlettered sister-in-law” is “despised by all” but faces “a life of dire poverty with a unique courage” and accomplishes an “unheard of” action “in society of those days by marrying her daughters in families” of lower caste (Bose, 1976, p. 86). Subarnalata is mentally drawn towards the vagabond Swadeshi rebel, Ambika, and suffers not only slander but also physical assault at the hands of her husband. But, she also realises that the valorisation of women’s

traditional roles by political activists is a dangerous fallacy. When she charges Ambika that the country will never be free by keeping a whole section of its citizens practically inactive by attributing an emotive purity to them, Subarnalata articulates the postcolonial feminist critique which shows how the populist discourse of nationalism relegates the question of women's liberation in the name of "maintaining a distinctive and superior cultural identity in the sanctity of the home" (Devenish, 2019, p. xix). Citizenship as full and equal participation, all the same, remains an unreach goal for the third and fourth generations of women portrayed in the final novel of the trilogy, which offers a turn in woman's performativity through Bakul's niece Shampa, who marries a fatally wounded trade union worker, Satyaban, against her parents' wish. Among Subarnalata's own daughters, Chanpa, the eldest one, satisfies herself by following a type of wifhood; whereas Parul, an introvert girl who scarifies her studies under the pressure of her father and brother, finds her intellectual capacity as an object of her educated and other-wisely caring husband's suspicion. Parul chooses a secluded life for herself as she is deserted by a growingly self-seeking society. Bakul, using the pen-name Anamika, becomes successful as an author, but the clash between an unrepentant orthodoxy and a "new era" which is "racing against time, obliterating every bit of insight, wisdom, promises on the way" (Debi, 2021, p. 278), she is anxious about the outcome of the long struggles of her mother and grandmother.

Conclusion: Ideology of Self-Sufficiency

The three novels are contextualized by the control over women's bodies within the normative structure of the post/colonial Bengali Hindu family, as well as by the unresolved "woman question" and tensions regarding sexuality—the production of the masculine/feminine binary in the contemporary public sphere. Cutting across the public/private, personal/political, rural/urban, and modern/traditional binaries, Ashapura Debi's narrative shows how the microcosm of the family is governed by the same rules as the macrocosm of social order. As Dipannita Dutta movingly points out, "Ashapura calls for [...] a sufficiency of the self" that is marked by "a resistance to different forms of domination in terms of both needs and rights." Her "thrust is on the emancipation of the self from the narrow confines of self-interest", and she insists on moving "beyond the solidified lines of the self and the other, which are socially constructed" (2015, p. 5-6). In an internally rifted setting, Satyabati, Subarnalata, and Bakul act on behalf of their respective generations of repressed women. While being torn apart between the dos and don'ts of social customs, they tend to cross the grid of paradigmatic 'good' womanhood. Their performance is often marked as 'deviant', as they undo indigenous, theological, colonial, and nationalist borders around a socially conscious body. The narrative of their lives provides South-Asian feminist writing and also gender activism with a specific ideological direction.

Notes

1. The volumes were published in London by Macmillan and Co. Ltd.
2. Ashapura Debi is also one of the most prolific writers in the history of Bengali literature. In a career spanning over sixty years, she wrote one hundred and eighty-one published novels, thirty-eight anthologies of short-fiction, fifty-two children's books, and collections of essays, autobiographical reminiscences, and interviews. Having no formal education, she started writing at the age of thirteen and continued to rock the Bengali cultural atmosphere with her unconventional stance against both traditional customs and unchecked modernization.
3. This novel won the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1976.
4. In an interview with Shivani Banerjee-Chakravorty, dated March 6, 1991, Ashapura Debi again confirms: "I write about what is most familiar to me, day-to-day experience in middle-class homes" (2000, p.24).

5. Internal evidence suggests that the narrative of *Pratham Pratisruti* begins in the eighteenth century.
6. See Patricia Ticineto Clough's (2012) analysis of Butler's theoretical combination of Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida.
7. Joan W. Scott's essay, "The Evidence of Experience", published in 1991 in the *Critical Inquiry* 17(1), serves as a key essay in Western feminist thought to examine how experiences are produced and subverted. Ashapurna Devi's fiction, in a number of ways, resonates strongly with the feminist credo that the personal is political, and provides us with a South-Asian version of the entire dynamics.
8. The medieval practice of marrying a girl child at the tender age of eight or so was abandoned. She was denied formal education and social liberty, forced to follow various rituals and expected to be an expert in cooking, spinning, and other household chores.
9. Kulin Brahmins observed strict caste rules and practiced polygamy. The great social reformer of Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) fought against this Hindu practice in the mid-nineteenth century.
10. The ritual of writing for the first time in life, is generally held as a part of the worship of the goddess of learning, Saraswati.
11. There are numerous cultural texts that support such discourse; to cite an example, poet Rajanikanta Sen's (1865-1910) call to wear simple clothes and eat coarse rice provided by a poor and distressed mother with pride.
12. This second novel of the trilogy has led the feminist movement in South-Asia and has been adapted for film and theatre.
13. In *Char Adhyay*, Tagore in fact warns about not repeating the colonial inhumanity in native relationships.
14. The new, or modern.

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