

# Representation of women Protagonists in Ashapurna Devi's *Pratham Pratisruti* and Arupa Patangiya Kalita's *Ayananta*: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract:** The world of literature abounds with feminist writings. However very few have perhaps been able to bring out the varied emotions of a woman as poignantly as Ashapurna Devi does in her *Pratham Pratisruti* in Bengali and *Arupa Patangiya Kalita*, in *Ayananta* in Assamese. Though written in different decades the two novels bring out the stark similarity of the operation of Patriarchy across time and space. This paper is an attempt to study the treatment of the female protagonists in both the novels and understand their social reality from the Protagonists' own lived experiences.

**Key Words:** Feminist, social customs. Patriarchy, Marriage, family, Ideal

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Women protagonists abound in literature of all genres. However, the true depiction of a woman's innate consciousness of her social reality, her emotions and reactions, is a subject matter of debate among critics of a feminist leaning. This concern arises from the fact that since we live in a patriarchal world, the voices of women that are portrayed in literature might be an echo of the patriarchal norms that has been internalized by her, or can perhaps be a reflection of what the writer perceives to be women's intrinsic reality. This is because our collective social psyche has been dominated by assumptions of male superiority as a social constraint, a universal fact of psychological and biological life (Rowbotham 117). One of the most important critics about women representation in literature is Banikanta Kakati who was writing as far back in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his article *Nari Hriday* (Women's heart) he expressed doubts about the correct portrayal of women in creative writings of the world. This argument is important because feminists argue that the family and the definition of femininity are crucial in considering the specific features of woman's situation and oppression in society. It is within the development of her feminine psyche and her ideological and socio-economic role as mother and housewife, that woman finds the oppression which is hers alone (Mitchell).

Between the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, creative writing has come a long way in terms of sensitivity towards treatment of women characters. Simon De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* were pioneering works which conceptualized women from a feminist perspective in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the context of Indian contemporary women writings, the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Rama Mehta, Anita Desai, Kamala Das Manju Kapur, Rajni Pannikar, Krishna Sabati, Kiran Desai, Amrita Pritam, Shashi Deshpande etc. are important. As far as Assamese literature is concerned Chandraprabha Saikiani, Sneha Devi, Nirupama Borgohain, Nilima Sarma, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Arupa Patangiya Kalita are some of the most important names in feminist literature and are known for their deft handling of the various nuances of a woman's character in their writings. Aside from Assamese, Bengali women writers such as Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Suchitra Bhattacharya, Manisha Roy, Sushmita Banerjee etc. have also contributed a lot towards understanding of women in society. It can be asserted at this point is that despite regional variations, women's oppression is similar across societies.

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER:

This paper takes up for analysis, a comparative study of the writings of two stalwarts of regional literature, Ashapurna Devi's, *Pratham Pratisruti* (first promise) in Bengali and Arupa Patangiya Kalita's *Ayananta*(Solstice) in Assamese. In this paper, a comparison of women protagonists in both the novels will be done to understand women at the cross roads of claustrophobic patriarchal values and their own pining for honour and freedom.

## 3. METHODOLOGY:

The methodology used for this study will be of an analytical nature. Further the comparative method will be applied to find out the similarities and dissimilarities between the two novels.

#### 4. DISCUSSION:

In the history of feminist literature, Ashapurna Devi's, *Pratham Pratisruti* published in 1964 is undoubtedly a great novel. This Jnanpith Award winner (1976) novel's main theme focuses on the oppression of women including child marriage, polygamy and society's overall resistance towards women's receiving education in contemporary Bengali society. In a society opposed to women's education, Satyabati, the central character of the novel, received basic education at home through a private tutor engaged by her progressive father. However, Satyabati was married off at an early age. Despite being a child bride, she kept on braving societal restrictions and tried to educate her own daughter but was defeated when her daughter was married off in her absence. A crestfallen Satyabati then leaves her home to seek solace in Kashi. Satyabati's pain and helplessness is brought out poignantly by Ashapurna Devi.

Satyabati was witty and had a great presence of mind who when told not to touch his writing materials, argued that the Hindu Goddesses Saraswati was a female too, thereby turning the argument on its head (*Pratham Pratisruti* 150). She was known in her childhood for questioning and rebelling against established customs and traditions like child marriage, wife beating and subordination of widows. Once, when she came to know that a man had beaten his wife in so badly that the woman went to a morbid condition, Satyabati gathered the children of the village and mocked the man comparing him to a trampling elephant and poked fun at him saying anyone who beat his wife would be troubled by frogs landing on his back. However, the fact that women had so deeply internalized patriarchal oppression is painfully expressed when the wife of *jota Dada* reprimands *Satyabati* for cracking jokes at her husband arguing that her husband had the right to beat her. (*Pratham Pratisruti* 57)

Womenfolk of that time practiced a fasting ritual namely *sejuti brat*, believing if they did so, the husband would not bring home a second wife (*Pratham Pratisruti* 84) A telling contradiction and irony of society is borne out by the fact that the same society which encouraged women to follow specified rituals to ensure the husband's fidelity, criticized her for expressing grief on her husband's second marriage saying that there was no harm in sharing a husband and the wife should be happy in her husband's happiness. It may be noted here that Satyabati herself witnessed one of her elder brother's getting married for a second time. (*Pratham Pratisruti* 78)

Satyabati's husband was an honest and well meaning person but lacked the courage to go against the strongly entrenched evil social customs. Satyabati had wanted to get her daughter married only after she had successfully completed her education but in contemporary Bengali society, an unmarried 'grown up' girl was seen as a bad omen for the household. Knowing that Satyabati would never agree to her child getting married early, Satyabati's mother in law called for her granddaughter to spend time with her and taking advantage of her mother's absence, got her married. Satyabati was informed about her daughter's marriage only on the day of the marriage. (*Pratham Pratisruti* 620) Satyabati could not stop the marriage on time but pleaded for her daughter to be returned but the groom's side refused to give back the girl because as they argued, once married, a girl, exclusively belonged to her in-laws household. A victim of superstition and patriarchy all her life, the protagonist ultimately feels defeated by this treachery and she decides to give up her familial life and retire to the Ghats of Kashi. When her husband questions her anger and tries to reason that Satyabati herself was given in marriage as a child by her father and that he had done no wrong in getting his daughter married, she responds that it is in the quest of this answer that she is leaving for Kashi (*Pratham Pratisruti* 624-625). Her answer is in fact, a question on the chilling social reality of the time, a question that seeks answers from society's collective conscience.

Like *Pratham Pratisruti*, Arupa Patangiya Kalita's novel *Ayananta* is also written on a similar feminist theme and ideology of a female character. The novel is a winner of the Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad award and revolves around the social challenges faced by Assamese women in the period before and after independence. Binapani, the central character of this novel, unlike Satyabati, had access to formal education for a few years. In school, Binapani was mocked at by her male peers who told her that after attaining puberty, a girl would never be allowed to study. This proved to be true when this bright, promising student, was withdrawn from school as soon as she attained puberty. The society's negligence towards women education is painfully reflected through the voices of her family members. The common people of the society in where she lives believed that 'home is the only school for a girl, it will be harmful for them if they will go to school (*Ayananta* 30). A heartbroken Binapani pleaded her family to let her continue her education but her family decided that she should be married off at the earliest.

This was the period of the Indian national Movement and Kalita introduces another character in the novel, that of Ruma, who was to play an important, albeit indirect part in Binapani's life. Ruma was in love with one of the activist of the freedom struggle whom she assisted in his endeavour. However, Ruma's family got her married to a rich man with questionable morals. After her marriage, Ruma was mentally and physically tortured by her husband to such an extent, that she lost her sanity. An insane Ruma was locked up in her room where she lived with the stench of her own excreta. Her daughter Tagar was also humiliated for being the daughter of a mad woman and was treated with disdain even by her own grandfather (*Ayananta* 111). Binapani was witness to the plight of Ruma and understood very well the machinations of a patriarchal society but could not fight her family when they forced her into getting married to a man

who was infamous for his character. Binapani had a love interest by the name of Ratan (Macpherlin), a boy who had converted to Christianity and was actively involved with the missionaries in works of social welfare. Binapani had imagined perhaps, a more liberated future with Ratan. With this marriage however, Binapani's life was thrown asunder and despite being a rebel at heart was cornered into suffering mental and physical torture at the hands of her selfish and despicable husband. In the meantime, Rumas's daughter Tagar came to Binapani's house to live with her for a few days. This was to change Binapani's life as her husband one day molests the girl. This was the proverbial last straw for Binapani and she decided to leave her family including her children to go and live with Tagar (*Ayananta* 267). This breaking away from the family signifies a breakage and ultimate rebellion against society's image of a married woman—an image that projected women as attaining true fulfillment only within the confines of a marriage and family.

Tagar goes on to train as a nurse and becomes self dependent. Tagar, for Binapani and for the reader becomes a symbol of change, heralding a new era.

There are significant differences and similarities in both the characters portrayed in the two novels. While Satyabati could not receive formal education, Binapani went to school for a few years. Both the characters right from their childhood protested against patriarchal norms. Binapani fell in love with Ratan and believed that he could save her from the social darkness which seemed to surround her. However she did not take any steps to either confess her love for Ratan or give a shape to her dreams. In fact, despite being aware of the grave flaws in her husband's character, Binapani bowed down to family pressure and got married. She continues to play the role of an 'ideal' wife till the time her patience finally snaps when a girl who is like her own daughter is molested by her husband.

In this context, Satyabati's character in comparison to Binapani, is more proactive. Though both of them came from oppressive societies, Satyabati did not compromise on her stand and put up with oppression in her adult life. In fact, her characterization seems to be stronger than that of Binapani.

However, the decision to finally shred family ties by both the characters seems to be based on the same ideology, that of symbolically rejecting society and of choosing self respect and honour over repressive norms and ideals into which they had been socialized. In doing so both the protagonists at the end send out a strong message that a life with freedom and honour is better than living as slaves within a marriage.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Though originating in two different societies, one Assamese and the other Bengali, the social problems of both the societies depicted are similar and have been woven seamlessly in both these novels. What comes through ultimately is an appeal to cut through the heaps of undulating superstitions and practices of the past and building a healthy and more inclusive society. These novels were written many decades ago, and much has changed for women since then, especially in the field of education. Nonetheless the oppression of women continues today and societies across the world continue to be patriarchal in form and spirit. To this extent, these aforementioned novels are still relevant in today's context also. This fact on its own is perhaps the biggest vindication of the success of these authors and the message that is voiced through their female Protagonists.

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