



The Fragmented Mother: Subversion of Normative Motherhood in Ashapura Devi's Short Stories

Puja Saha

College Part Time Teacher, The Bhawanipur Education Society College
PhD Scholar, School of Women's Studies
Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

Abstract: The article delves into Ashapura Devi's portrayal of motherhood in her short stories. Often, mainstream literary and cultural representations confine a woman's identity to the biological act of reproduction. This homogenized and sexist view overlooks women's potential as individuals. As a woman writer, Ashapura thoroughly explores the intricate psyche of her female characters, emphasizing their individuality. Despite her popularity, she has been dismissed as a writer of mere 'domestic' stories lacking 'political punch.' This article contends that in her works, the domestic space becomes a contested arena where women engage in daily negotiations with patriarchy. Ashapura deliberately positions her female characters as mothers, wives, and daughters within the domestic structure while simultaneously subverting it. She challenges the politically charged notion of motherhood, deconstructing it to unveil its neglected fragmentary nature. In her stories, women are not portrayed as helpless victims unaware of their subjugation. Even instances of surrender to domination are strategically employed to criticize the partiality and double standards ingrained in society.

Keywords: motherhood, sexism, gender, reproductivity.

The Olinka girls do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children. But I am not the mother of anybody's children, I said, and I am something.

— Alice Walker, *The Colour Purple*.

The idea of motherhood across the world is determined by various patriarchal cultural codifications. Since giving birth to a child is an experience exclusive to women, maternity is held as basic to women's lives and has often been used as a ploy to curb their freedom. In India the popular notion of motherhood is shaped, constructed, and highly influenced by the mythologies and popular legends of the land. The imagination of the people of the sub-continent draws heavily from the maternal iconography present in its mythologies. In the popular imagination, the mother is a kind, generous, de-sexualized persona devoid of any desire for herself. According to eminent feminist writer, V. Geetha, "Amongst Hindus, the mother is a model woman, self-sacrificing, heroic and essentially noble." (Geetha 14). This particular notion of motherhood has 'elevated' the status of the Indian woman from an ordinary individual to that of a divine energy, a Devi. Sudhir Kakar, in his



book *The Intimate Relations*, analyzes that “Besides desexing the woman another step in the denial of her desire is her idealization (especially of the Indian woman) as nearer to a purer divine state and thus an object of worship and adoration.” (125). Myths play a crucial role in this context as they shape the collective imagination and beliefs of the masses. Kakar underscores that in India, myths are not confined to a bygone era; rather, they persistently thrive, retaining their symbolic potency. These Indian myths form a cultural idiom that aids individuals in constructing and integrating their inner worlds. Instead of the presence of several goddesses in Indian myths, in real life “it has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power.” (65), argues Jasodhara Bagchi, a renowned feminist scholar and activist, in her essay “Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal”. The notion of motherhood, based on its mythological definitions and attributes, was reshaped and reconstructed during the Indian nationalist era. The nation was defined as a mother and it proved to be more effective to kindle the national fervor of the natives than a few geographical lines drawn on a paper. Criticized severely for their ill-treatment of their women in the form of child marriage, atrocious rituals of widowhood, and burning the widows, the bourgeois nationalists of nineteenth-century India, especially in Bengal, utilized the image of the mother as one of the positive grounds to challenge the superiority of the colonizers. It started with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay presenting the image of the mother as a metaphor for the country in his proto-nationalist novel, *Anandamath*, and found a politicized nature of its own in the nationalist discourse in Bengal. The mythologized, proverbial image of the Bengali mother was seen as the only way, apart from forming a model for the ‘ideal wife’, to reclaim the lost honor of the enslaved natives from the foreign rulers. It should also be noticed that it was the mother-son relation that was celebrated, and the glory of the mother was authenticated and justified by the masculine greatness of her Hindu warrior sons. To women, apart from being bestowed with unsolicited ‘greatness’, it reemphasized her restricted identity, limited to childbirth and nurturing her children. In her study of motherhood in colonial Bengal Jasodhara Bagchi argues:

The nationalist glorification of motherhood had a far-reaching impact on the ideological control over women. Motherhood of Bengali women was seen as the ‘ultimate identity’ of Bengali women. It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of privileges like education, and professions that were being wrested by their men and glorifying motherhood only through her reproductive power. (65).

This persistently politicized and patriarchal perception of motherhood continues to thrive in the collective imagination, remaining an integral aspect of Indian culture and tradition. From literature to popular mediums of entertainment like television and cinema, the Indian mother is portrayed as an overtly dramatic and sentimental figure whose world revolves around the wellbeing of her sons.

This article explores the portrayal, envisioning, and rediscovery of ‘mothers’ in the short stories penned by Ashapura Devi. Ashapura belonged to the succeeding generation of Bankim-Sarat-Tagore. By the time she commenced her literary journey, Rabindranath Tagore was approaching the final stages of his life and career. Bankim Chandra had passed away in 1894, well before her birth, and Sarat Chandra died in 1938, just two years after she published her first short story. She started writing her short stories when the Kallol movement, the first conscious literary



movement in Bengal, had just begun. Determined to introduce modernism into Bengali literature, the movement began with a group of writers, influenced by Marxist and Freudian theories, endeavouring to address a world traumatized by the horrors of the post-war era. A conscious initiative was taken by a group of young and daring writers and poets, including Premendra Mitra, Buddhadeb Basu, Mohitlal Majumdar, and Bishnu De, to challenge the sentimental worship of nature's beauty and the romanticism associated with Tagore. They deliberately dismantled the ideal of motherhood and domestic love, replacing them with explicit passions and desires through provocative writing designed to shock readers. In this transformative period for Bengali literature, where the approach towards the world was undergoing significant changes, Ashapura focused exclusively on the mundane lives of women. This singular focus led to her being labeled as a mere 'domestic writer,' dealing with the 'insignificant' aspects of daily life. However, what was overlooked in the process of simplifying her works was the subversion inherent in her treatment of the domestic and mundane. Consciously drawing her characters from the structured realms of domesticity, she placed her women characters within the confined roles of mothers and wives, only to challenge these very structures. Due to the conservative nature of her own private life, Ashapura, in contrast to the 'rebellious' writers of her time, observed the reality of women's everyday lives intimately from within the confines of her home. Otherized in the contemporary literary scene of Bengal, Ashapura chose the gendered Other as the focus of her short stories, turning it into a challenge to disrupt the tradition of stereotyped, sexist representations of women prevalent in mainstream literature.

The existing body of literary scholarship on Ashapura Devi primarily focuses on her novels, particularly the *Satyabati Trilogy*. Regarding her short fiction, researchers have commonly employed a general feminist approach to comprehend her works. Remarkably, there has been a noticeable absence of in-depth analyses of her short stories. In these neglected pieces of literature, she consistently questions the conventional, homogeneous understanding of women in socially defined roles, an aspect that has unfortunately received limited attention in recent research investigations. Popular feminist critics Lalita and Tharu argue, "Where Ashapura Debi is concerned...the critical dismissal is also the result of the apparently conservative posture her narratives promote. Rebellion, defiance, anger, resentment and passion are portrayed to evoke our sympathy....It is as if given the scheme of the Ashapura world, a rebellion that stubbornly insists on its fruits is an escapist dream..." (Tharu 476). However, in this article, I intend to contest this observation and argue that Ashapura's literary world serves as a mirror portraying the harsh reality. Ashapura asserts that her writing is a direct reflection of what she observes and experiences in her surroundings. Writing exclusively about the private lives of men and women, the writer has created a fictional world that buzzes with the unheard voices of women confined behind the closed doors of Bengali households. She endeavors to delve into the often-overlooked personal experiences of middle-class Bengali women, providing a voice to lives that have historically been disregarded. A major number of her short stories deal with women within marriage and family. While she digs deep into the complex psyche of her female characters, playing various prescribed roles in the domestic space, motherhood emerges as an important aspect. Motherhood in her stories is no longer an ideology but a lived experience of women's day-to-day lives. Mothers in her stories neither have any 'divine capacity', nor are they godly beings devoid of all desires. Rather, they possess a multitude of emotions inherent to every



human being. Their authenticity lies in unveiling the reality concealed behind the imposed facade of divinity.

While Ashapura has a substantial body of work that sheds a critical light on the subject of maternity, for conciseness, this article focuses on four short stories that center around the concept of motherhood and the experiences women undergo as mothers. The four chosen stories, "Chhinnamasta", "Bhoy", "Sthirchitra", and "Kasai" reveal four different aspects of maternal experience. While in "Chhinnamasta" a mother's hurt pride overshadows her love for her son, in "Bhoy" she becomes the subject of social mockery for outliving her children, in "Sthirchitra" the author recounts a mother's disappointment after she gets the news of her son being alive, and in "Kasai," Ashapura condemns the hypocrisy ingrained in a society that incessantly compels women to demonstrate their domestic value as both mothers and wives. In each of the stories Ashapura with the brilliant observational strength of a writer portrays the struggles, the negotiations, and the criticisms that a woman goes through in a society governed by patriarchal cultural norms.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen, in her introduction to Ashapura Devi's short story collection, remarks, "In Ashapura's short stories the women characters are more important and more complete than the male characters. It is only with the perspective of a woman that Ashapura has seen the world." (Sen xvii). Her female characters are capable of subtle, complex, and conflicting emotions. She repeatedly interrogates the deified image of the mother and deliberately punctures the elevated socio-cultural construct of the maternal figure. One such story is "Chhinnamasta" which depicts the mother-son relationship where the power politics of the domestic sphere revolves around exerting control over the son. "Chhinnamasta" is the tale of Jayabati, a widow mother, and her daughter-in-law, Pratibha, both of whom indulge in a power play at whose center is Bimalendu, Jayabati's only son. Jayabati's dream to welcome the new daughter-in-law into her household shatters as soon as she realizes that Pratibha does not fit into the role of a coy newlywed woman who would listen to her instructions. Pratibha's rude manners, ruthless complaints, and growing control over Bimalendu turn the otherwise quiet Jayabati into a quarrelsome mother-in-law. The author writes, "How the son slowly starts to move away and the daughter-in-law begins to spread her authority! Jayabati only stares with helpless rage." (Devi, *Chhotogalpo Sankalan* 164). Pratibha appears as a rival to her in the domestic battlefield and strives to snatch away from Jayabati the dearest thing in the world, her son. Jayabati feels envious as she witnesses Bimalendu distancing away from her, "She could bear anything but not the change in Bimalendu." (Devi 166). Soon Jayabati's rage turns to her son as well who now hardly speaks to her. The same Jayabati who could not bear separation from her son for a single day takes a sigh of relief when Bimalendu returns to Kolkata after his marriage. Unable to bear the insensitive remarks of Pratibha on her widowhood, at one point in the story she even wishes for the death of her son as a way to teach Pratibha a lesson. Ironically her wish is fulfilled as soon Bimalendu dies in a road accident, but was Jayabati mortified at the death of her only son? Did she regret her fatal wish? The story reaches its end as we see Jayabati smiling as she 'affectionately' feeds Pratibha, now a widow herself.

"Chhinnamasta" is unsettling for readers as they witness Jayabati, once an exceedingly loving mother, smiling cruelly at the demise of her only son. Jayabati subverts the conventional understanding of maternity, as her character resists the popular image of the nurturing 'good



mother'. According to Kakar, "It needs to be noted that this idealized image of the 'good mother' is largely a male construction. Women do not sentimentalize their mothers in this way. For daughters, the mother is not an adoring figure on a pedestal: she is a more earthly presence, not always benign but always *there*." (83). Nancy Chodorow also raises a similar argument in her seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow argues that boys and girls have different experiences while being mothered. Whereas boys in order to understand their identity must gain a gendered identity that is not female i.e. not mother, for girls their identity is based on and is developed through a process of identifying with the mother. While explaining the male understanding of the maternal figure Kakar further argues, "...in unconscious fantasy, the vagina as the passage between being and non-being is not only perceived as a source of life and equated with emergence into light, but also shunned as the forbidding dark hole, the entrance into the depths of a death womb which takes life back into itself." (89). The argument becomes poignant in case of Jayabati. The death of Bimalendu becomes instrumental in her pursuit of revenge, ultimately leading to her triumph in the private domain. Her lost control over the household is ironically regained by the death of her son. In this context, Bimalendu transcends his roles as a son and a husband. He becomes the primary instrument in the hands of Jayabati's ruthless adversary, Pratibha. Jayabati emerges as the punishing mother, not only penalizing her daughter-in-law but also her son. This is in response to the humiliation she endured and the loss of the authority she once wielded over the household and its occupants.

What seems interesting here is Ashapurna's choice of the title, "Chhinnamasta". In Hindu mythology, *Chhinnamasta* represents the ferocious side of the *Devi*, one of the many forms of the mother goddess, a self-decapitating figure who severs her own head to drink her blood. Her duality as both destructive and nurturing energy represents temporality and immortality. As a self-sacrificing figure, she is popular as a symbol of Indian motherhood but at the same time, her sexuality and tremendous power are at odds with the caring and nurturing aspects of the mother. In the portrayal of Jayabati, Ashapurna boldly constructs a maternal figure who sacrifices her son not for any greater purpose but to satisfy her quest for vengeance. What intrigues the reader even further is that Jayabati is never cast as a villainous character in the narrative. Rather, her unconscious yearning for her son's death arises as a natural and humane reaction to the repeated humiliations she experiences. As readers, we also covertly relish in her eventual triumph. The instance when Jayabati is observed smiling instills a sense of unease in the reader. It disrupts their comfort and prompts them to question their capacity to embrace the distinctiveness of the character. Jayabati's character not only dismantles the portrayal of the stereotypical Hindu widow mother, reliant on male family members for survival, but through her persona, Ashapurna also casts a counter gaze at patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

While in "Chhinnamasta" Jayabati's satisfaction in avenging her humiliation adds different dimensions to her character, "Bhoy" depicts a mother's earnest desire to stay alive even after the death of all her children. Ashapurna gives a sarcastic picture of our society which finds it difficult to believe that a woman has a life of her own beyond childcare. In "Bhoy" Ashapurna explores Drabamoyee's journey through different stages of motherhood. We find her in the story playing solely the role of a mother from the tender age of eighteen when she lost her firstborn until the death of her last son, Murari. The story begins and ends with the death of her children and in between we find Drabamoyee metamorphosing from a sad young woman who wanted to die as she could not



bear the death of her firstborn to an old woman who earnestly clings on to life even after the demise of her last son. Ashapura also shows how patriarchy exercises its power not only through men but often through women as well. Hence, we see a middle-aged Drabamoyee, who herself after much sorrow and grief gradually learned to cope with the untimely death of her children, taunting her daughter-in-law for staying at her parents' home on the 'pretext' of her three-year-old brother's death. Drabamoyee represents the majority of Indian women, whose worth in the household is determined by the number of sons they can reproduce. In her middle age, Drabamoyee is seen with her seven children as a powerful authoritative figure dominating the course of her household and then suddenly life takes a turn. At sixty, she lost her eldest son Ananda, the earning and obedient son who used to run her household. The loss of the son was emotional as well as financial. Ashapura narrates Drabamoyee's situation, "She would turn into the soil by leaving food and water.....this is an easy way she discovered to make death closer in the shame of being alive." (Devi, *Chhotogolpo Sankalan* 153). Slowly she loses five other children. Her decline in age and power begins. In her old age Drabamoyee, bereft of her authority, productivity, and power, becomes a subject of mockery to others for outliving her children. Once a dominating and intimidating figure, Drabamoyee is now taunted by her daughters-in-law for being "shamelessly" alive. Ashapura's heart-wrenching description of the misery of the old woman makes us empathize with her, "Where is her ability to forsake food and water, leading to an oath of death? ...She has even lost the strength to utter the names of those who have abandoned her. What only has increased is the sense of hunger and thirst." (154). On the *Shraddha* ceremony of her last son, Murari, an old and fragile Drabamoyee is seen roaming around the house with a stick supervising all like a dethroned queen as if trying to vainly recall the days of lost glory. In the final scene, we see her skeptical about the treatment of the native doctor, asking for a sahib doctor for better treatment, earnestly imploring all to save her life.

As the story ends Drabamoyee emerges as a tragic figure, laughed at and ridiculed by all for her desire for life. This highlights the pervasive issue in our country concerning women's health that has predominantly been associated with maternal health. Unfortunately, teenagers and women beyond their reproductive years scarcely garner the attention of society and the state, both of which often exhibit indifference toward the overall well-being of women. What catches our attention is that throughout the story Drabamoyee, the perpetual mother, is criticized sometimes for 'overreacting' to the loss of her firstborn at the age of eighteen, for her 'unbearable' hue and cry when she again lost a child at the age of thirty-two and finally, she becomes the subject of contempt to all at the end when she stops mourning the death of her children and expresses an earnest desire to live. Her identity and her manners are the subjects of scrutiny and are constantly regulated by others. As a mother her subjectivity is continuously modified by the demands of society. Her explicit desire for life is seen by others as a threat to the extraordinary ideology of motherhood. A mother, like the old Drabamoyee, is seen as an embarrassment to society, an unnecessary liability and hence she is told that she 'should' die as if it is her moral duty to renounce her life once her children are not there. Drabamoyee's story reminds us of Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini". Jashoda could exercise her authority and was valued by all as long as she could breastfeed the children of the Zamindar family. No sooner did she lose the ability to breastfeed, which was seen as her 'use value', than she was dethroned from the 'noble status' of a *Devi*. Mahasweta Devi highlights in the story the unambiguous difference between myth and reality. The Jashoda of her story is the stark opposite of the mythological Jashoda, Lord



Krishna's foster mother. In "Stanadayini" the author shifts from myth to reality and shows the insufficiency of mythology in India where gender, class, and various other factors bind women to a subordinate position. In Ashapura's story Drabamoyee's 'use value' deteriorates with her age and she gradually loses her status and worth in the family. Like Jashoda, Drabamoyee too has no memory of her own mother and childhood. Her only memory is that of being a mother herself, of perpetually carrying a child in her womb. As motherhood is deemed 'innate' to women, it has often been employed as a motif to restrict their rights. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her introduction to the book, *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* shares her personal experience as an expecting mother: "I once had a strange personal experience. I was pregnant and was returning from work; it had rained heavily. The street on my house was flooded and I had no umbrella. A fruit vendor selling fruits ran across the street to offer me his umbrella saying, 'Ma you should not get wet in this condition.'" (2). Although the gesture was a kind one, Krishnaraj highlights that the problem lies far deeper. She points to "the pervasive respect that motherhood has in Indian culture as opposed to a woman as an individual". (2).

Maternity becomes a subject of interrogation in another story of Ashapura, "Sthirchitra". "Sthirchitra" is a complex story of a mother's attachment to her son and her desire to immortalize the memory of her dead son by making a memorial temple. However, events become problematic when she unconsciously uses the memorial temple as a pretext to fulfill her long-repressed desire to have her own house. The story begins with the accident and the consequent news of the death of Dibyakumar Sen, the only son of Sati Sen and Malabya Sen. Sati turns into stone when she receives the news of her son's death. The author depicts how the loss of her only son leaves her shattered, "The media world only keeps count of the numbers of the dead and injured, but who does keep the account of the numerous dead hidden inside the number? The woman called Sati Sen, who died with that news on the thirteenth of November, cannot be made to flow back in the tide of life anymore." (Devi, *Swanivachita* 213). Soon she is informed that they will get a good amount of money as compensation from Dibya's office. Although, at first, she taunts her husband for accepting the money, she is found more excited about it later. She plans to make a house with that money and there she decides to build the memorial temple of her son. With childlike excitement, she starts dreaming of the house, something that she has desired for long. Forgetting her present tragedy she exclaims in joy "How I always longed for such a day!" (Devi 218). She plans the room where she would make the temple for her son, how she would decorate it with a large photo framed in white where there would hang a thick garland. She eagerly waits for the day when they will move into their new house. Coincidentally the day of the inauguration collided with her son's birthday and she imagines how her son will get a new life and will be metaphorically born again in that memorial room. The story creates a twist when the day before the inauguration she receives a letter written by her son, informing her that he is not dead, he has lost his body parts but is still alive. Sati, the mother, feels as if someone has cruelly smashed her dreams. "How could the woman called Sati remain standing if she sees an unfamiliar strange creature coming out of the depths of the sea pushing aside the young fresh picture of her son framed in white, kept above the slim bed in the middle of the pure untainted memorial temple room of Dibya and trying to replace it?" (223). Instead of being happy we find Sati dumbfounded as she reads the letter written by her son requesting them to rescue him and take him home.



Sati's character, as perplexing as it seems to the reader, once again disrupts the age-old concept of the benevolent mother. She fails to realize when she stopped mourning for her son and started using his memory to defend her dream of owning a house. Her affection for her son is replaced by her artificial desire to immortalize his memory. Her transformation is shown through her fluctuating emotions. The metaphorical rebirth that she envisioned for Dibya through the splendid execution of his memorial temple, a manifestation of her profound love for her son, is shattered by the revelation of his survival. Similar to Jayabati's character, Sati's intricate psyche unsettles the reader and evokes moments of anxiety as one witnesses the 'forbidden' aspects of motherhood. Her character, like the character of Jayabati, disrupts the expectations of a conventional reader accustomed to the orthodox, gendered portrayal of mothers as goddesses.

Ashapura endeavours to question the deeply rooted norms linked to motherhood within Bengali society and, more expansively, in Hindu culture. She examines societal hypocrisy and double standards in another short story titled "Kasai," casting a critical light on the overwhelming expectations imposed on women in terms of domestic responsibilities, especially in the nurturing of children. The narrative of "Kasai" paints a poignant portrait of a husband questioning his wife's maternal duties, highlighting the burdensome nature of societal expectations. The story recounts the misery of a woman trapped in the politics of domestic life where ironically it is the women of the house who are ruthless and unsympathetic to the plight of another woman. Kamala finds herself unable to tend to her crying infant due to her household duties. As she endeavors to care for her ailing son, she faces relentless taunting from the members of the household. Unable to soothe the child, her frustrated husband angrily abandons the infant at the kitchen door, prompting sarcastic comments from those around them. Ultimately, after a series of dramatic events, when Kamala seeks solace on the terrace to escape the oppressive atmosphere within the house. The relief is short-lived as soon her husband returns and forcefully takes the child from her. The doctor declares the child to be dead. Kamala is finally 'relieved' from her household duties and is alienated by her family members for 'failing' to perform her responsibilities as a mother. Unable to bear the inhumanity any longer Kamala bursts out in protest against her husband one day but all her allegations turn into dust when her husband accuses her of being selfish and calls her a *Kasai*, a butcher, who murdered their child on the pretext of performing domestic duties.

Discussing mothering and childcare in the Indian context V. Geetha argues, "...pregnancy and mothering do narrow a woman's chances of being economically productive and this, in certain circumstances, could and does lead to a lowering of her bargaining position and even status within the household" (*Patriarchy* 70). Discussing the position of economically productive women within the domestic space she further argues, "...her contribution might not be valued as work, but an extension of her household responsibilities. This is most likely to happen with respect to home-based labour, which, being done at home, remains 'invisible' and is not viewed as productive work, in the sense a man's work, done outside home would be" (*Patriarchy* 70). Adrienne Rich in her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born* proposes that the structure of motherhood comprises various control mechanisms that constrain women to the roles of motherhood and compliance. These



mechanisms operate subtly, ensnaring women without their awareness, ultimately reducing them to powerless victims:

...marriage as economic dependence, as a guarantee to a man of 'his' children; the theft of childbirth from women;...the laws regulating contraception and abortion;...the denial that work done by women at home is part of 'production': the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; the solitary confinement of 'full-time motherhood'; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives him rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother...that she is inadequate and ignorant...all these are connecting fibers of this invisible institution (276-277).

In "Kasai," Kamala feels betrayed by her husband, who accuses her of being the one accountable for their child's death, all the while avoiding his own responsibility as a father. Both Kamala and her child are portrayed as victims of the covert politics within the Bengali joint family structure. Her character is presented as a casualty of the substantial expectations placed on her to be an exemplary wife and mother within the joint family dynamics of a middle-class household. This portrayal urges us to reflect on the significance of the title. Who is the real butcher? Is it Kamala, who overburdened with her domestic 'duties', fails to save her child, or the family members whose astonishing lack of empathy leaves the readers bewildered? Similar to many of her other stories, the choice of title in this narrative compels readers to reflect on the role of society in the oppression of women and the unfiltered portrayal of social realism evident in Ashapura's works.

According to Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, editors of *Noon in Calcutta*, a Bengali short story anthology, Ashapura's stories lack 'political punch'. Here I would like to argue that Ashapura's position as a woman writer cannot be simplified and dismissed as such. In the four stories discussed in this article, Ashapura intricately exposes the readers to the multifaceted aspects of motherhood and the continual negotiations a woman has to make every day in a male-governed society. In stories such as these Ashapura boldly dismantles the conventional ideology of motherhood by her fearless portrayal of emotions that are frequently overlooked in women. Her characters subvert the widely accepted notion of the 'good mother'. Be it in "Chhinamasta", "Sthirchitra", or "Bhoy" Ashapura boldly rejects the so-called glory attached to maternity by presenting the more human side of the woman where she ceases to be a politicized metaphor. Even in stories such as "Kasai" where the protagonist seemingly lacks agency and appears to succumb to her circumstances, the narrative style suggests that this surrender is not a conformity to tradition; rather, it serves as a strategic maneuver by the author to emphasize the necessity of solidarity among women as the sole pathway to liberation from oppression. As Ashapura pragmatically expresses, "One cannot help mentioning that one of the major reasons for this is the woman's lack of loyalty to her own sex...If we want this state of things to change we must have a strong sense of solidarity so that women don't have to turn to men every time they are trying to build up something....Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency which can come only with the consolidation of female power."



(Devi, *Indian Women* 22). Ashapura in her stories not only subverts the stereotypical image of womanhood but also gives voice to the hitherto unspoken aspects of women's lives. In one of her interviews with Chitra Deb, Ashapura remarked:

I had created these women with a view to voice a protest against the predicament of women but I never wanted to make it explicit the plot of all my writing is inspired by real life incidents. I have never been judgmental about any issue but only documented episodes...hence my rebellious image remained camouflaged. (Deb 283).

In her works, 'home' or the domestic sphere emerges as a contested space where women negotiate with patriarchal forces in an attempt to retain their individuality. She deliberately challenges the notion of the 'archetypal mother,' portraying her as a tangible, human woman. As she aptly puts it in her essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality": "Women have always been misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood....The very word 'woman' is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is." (19). Ashapura consistently undermines the rigid image associated with an Indian woman as a mother, purposefully keeping it fragmented. Her women characters defy and subvert the ideological constraints of motherhood, exposing the human side of women, confined within the framework of maternity, along with all their intricacies and desires. The author refrains from passing judgment, instead articulates what she perceives as truth – truth seen through the lens of a woman. In doing so, she dismantles the prevalent notion of the 'divine mother.'

Works Cited

- Bagchi, Jasodhara. *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*. Sangam Books (India) Pvt. Ltd., 1995.
- Bagchi, Jasodhara. "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 42/43, 1990, pp. WS65-WS71. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1999.
- Datta, Dipannita. *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Deb, Chitra. "Ashapura Devi in Conversation with Chitra Deb". *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading*, edited by Dipannita Datta, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 268-291.
- Devi, Ashapura. "Indian Women: Myth and Reality". *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, edited by Jasodhara Bagchi, Sangam Books, 1995, pp. 19-23.
- Devi, Ashapura. *Swanirvachita Shrestha Galpo*. Mandal Publishing House, 1988.
- . *Chhotogalpo Sankalan*. National Book Trust, India, 2017.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Shrestha Galpo*. Dey's Publishing, 2016.
- Dutta, Krishna, and Andrew Robinson, editors. *Noon in Calcutta: Short Stories from Bengal*. Viking, 1992.
- Dutta, Sangeeta. "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 42/43, 1990, pp. WS84-WS94. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396896?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents



Geetha, V. *Theorising Feminism: Gender*. Stree, 2015.

---. *Theorising Feminism: Patriarchy*. Stree, 2015.

Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. Penguin Books, 1990.

---. *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1982.

Krishnaraj, Maithreyi. *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?*. Routledge Taylors and Francis Group, 2010.

Rich, Adreinne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W.W. Norton, 1995. pp. 276-277.

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "Bhumika". *Ashapura Devi Chhotogolpo Sankalan*, edited by Ashapura Devi, National Book Trust, India, 2017, pp. xv-xxiv.

*** Translations from original Bengali texts have been done by the writer of this article.**

Author Bio: Puja Saha has completed her MA in English from Presidency University in 2013 and her M.Phil. in Women's Studies from Jadavpur University in 2019. Currently, she is pursuing PhD in Women's Studies from the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University. She is also a Contractual Part-Time Teacher at The Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata. Her research interests include gender, feminist criticism and theory, women's writings and women's life narratives from colonial and postcolonial India.