

## PROTEST IN ASHAPURNA DEVI'S *THE FIRST PROMISE*

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### Abstract

Women in India from centuries have suffered oppression due to the denial of education. An awakening towards such deprivation began in the Twentieth century with reforms like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also pleaded against the Sati custom, and freed women from the horrendous custom of burning on their husband's pyre. The subjugated position and untold miseries suffered by women were results of their lack of education. Ashapura Devi was the victim and survivor of the same tradition. So, her *Pratham Pratisruti*, is called the novel of protest because of the spirit of revolt in the protagonist, Satyavati..

The focus of the present paper is on the one hand to present the deplorable condition of Indian women in pre-independent India and on the other the protests and revolts registered by them for the emancipation of the women folk. Satyavati, the protagonist of the novel, had protested against every taboo of the society, broke many customs, revolted against number of illogical norms throughout her life and was successful in her task

**Key Words:** Protest, Denial of Education, Women's Revolt, Awakening, Subjugation, Sati System

*“Hindu society in the 19th century suffered from false religion illusions that Hindu scripture did not sanction female education that education of girls wrought wrath of Gods leading to their widowhood.”<sup>1</sup>*

Women in India from centuries have suffered oppression due to the denial of education. An awakening towards such deprivation began in the Twentieth century with reforms like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also pleaded against the Sati custom, and freed women from the horrendous custom of burning on their husband's pyre. The subjugated position and untold miseries suffered by women were results of their lack of education.

The Christian missionaries were the first to set up the Calcutta female Juvenile Society in 1819. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar established no less than 35 girls' school in Bengal, for amelioration of girls in the society.<sup>2</sup>

Discussing the rewriting of patriarchy in late nineteenth century Bengal, Judith.E.Walsh quotes Dharendra Pal, an advice manual writer, who argued that women's education was essential to a companionate marriage but it was to be a special and separate kind. In the introduction to his text, *Strir Sahit Kathopakathan*, [Conversations with the Wife] he says:

Women folk have one task in this world, men another. So there is no possibility that a single type of education for both will produce anything but harm...so women should be educated in all those

things which are essential for a woman when she lives in a family, all that would make her a learned and cultured woman, a woman who is devoted to dharma and one who is worthy to be called a true wife.<sup>3</sup>

Educating women was the most difficult task and many novelists present a clear picture of the plight of women, Ashapura Devi is the most prominent writer among them. Her *Pratham Pratisruti*, published in 1964 (*The First Promise*) is called the novel of protest because of the spirit of revolt in the protagonist, Satyavati.

*The First Promise* is Ashapura Devi's most acclaimed work, which won her the Rabindra Puruskar in 1966 and the Bhartiya Janapith award in 1977. In this novel she has presented a very realistic picture of traditional Hindu society of the late Nineteenth century. In her preface to *Pratham Pratisruti* Ashapura Devi says:

The history of times past is made up of stories about the rise and fall of the public world. And that restless, clamorous history writ 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? We would find abundant treasures if only we focused there. But history has invariably overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. That domain has always been neglected. This book is about an unknown woman who was among those who carved out the etchings of a promise from within those ignored interior spaces of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> (*Pratham Pratisruti*, Author's Preface).

As an author Ashapura Devi has presented the socio-cultural picture of the Indian society in which being born as a girl was the toughest task. Satyavati or Satya, the protagonist of the novel, was called the girl of protest for raising questions against every illogical tradition of the society. Because of Satya's nature many of her family members did not like her, Mokshda's favorite outbursts were: *'That's what I'm telling you!' 'This family will suffer because of that girl.'*<sup>5</sup> (30) But her father Ramkali, an intellectual, fathomed her wit and wished to know from Satya, "why a girl needs education", and the answer he gets leaves him bewildered. In a conversation between the father and the daughter Ramkali asks Satya :

What is the use of girls learning? They won't become rent-collectors or cashiers, will they? Ramkali questioned her with an amused laugh. Once more Satya's vehemence returned . . . 'Why should they become cashiers? They will learn to read the Ramayana Mahabharata and Puranas. Then they'd not have to keep waiting for the Kathak to come around.'<sup>6</sup> (131)

The deep desire of Satya for education, leaves Ramkali in amazed. And as was the belief of that age that girls were not allowed to touch books otherwise they would become blind, held Satya from getting educated like her brothers. Satya resented it and quietly unnoticed she taught herself to read and write, unhampered of the fear of turning blind if she read or wrote. Her arguments with her friend demonstrates her fearlessness and rational mind.

How can learning ever lead to sin? Isn't Maa Saraswati herself a woman? Doesn't she hold in her hands the four Vedas, the ultimate among all scriptures?<sup>7</sup> (126)

Satyavati then breaks the taboo and to the amazement of all demonstrates that:

Satyabati then proudly claims that not only does she not hesitate to touch a taal paat, she can even write on it. The other reacts as if they have been bitten by a snake. <sup>8</sup> (100) I have touched it, so what? I have offered my prayers to Maa Saraswati before laying my hands on them. <sup>9</sup> (102)

Her fellow friends feel amazed to a girl learn the alphabets so easily and it's when she writes the alphabets more easily than her brother who even after spending hours was unable to write.

Her zeal and unyielding desire for education compels her father Ramkali to take up the task of educating her, himself. Education becomes one of the motif on which the entire story of *Pratham Pratisruti* rests. The first glimpse of education on the young mind of Satya was when a nine-year-old Satya makes up rhymes about the village bully, Jatadharan, for beating his wife until she becomes unconscious, and with her playmates, roams the village chanting them.

The Elephant footed Jata da – there he goes the blighter! May a toad kick the back of this stupid wife-beater! Jata's really gross, he's an abuser like no other! Watch the fun, for now he'll run, here comes the wife's father! <sup>10</sup> (31)

Thus this was her first public protest against any injustice. With this protesting spirit Satya was sent to her in-laws' house where conditions were not so different for her. Elokeshi, Satya's mother-in-law, was a narrow minded woman, and from the very first day, she treats her as an adversary because of the differences in their perceptions. Satya's rebellious nature was the matter of discussion for everybody even her husband thought that why God has not given me a normal doll like wife like others? But Satya had faced every situation boldly in her in-laws' house and when she went to Kolkata she becomes clearer in her motives regarding empowering and emancipating women.

But when Satya got maturity her tool of protest, literacy, for injustice becomes sharper. When Puti, a nine year old child bride, was murdered by her husband because she has refused his conjugal rights, Satya was in her thirties and she speaks out loud for this act of injustice. She makes a spirited appeal for justice in front of a British policeman.

There are heaps of sins that have collected over centuries. If you can rid us of those, only then would I say that you deserve to be lawmakers. Why have you taken on the guise of a ruler in another's land? Why can't you just huddle in to your ships and leave? <sup>11</sup> (484)

Literacy was the reason for Satya's strength. She observes the difference between right and wrong more critically which others cannot realize because of their ignorance. But for this she had to face many refusals and sarcasms too, yet she had her answers ready always. When she had started teaching in Sarvamangala Vidyalaya, Nabakumar raised questions about her teaching skills:

'Are you so learned that you can teach now?'

Satya had smiled at his sarcasm, "Teaching is in my blood- I've taught all my life! I could start out because that's how I was made. And my education? That will progress as I read. I do what I can." <sup>12</sup> (394)

Educating women was in Satya's blood. Satya primarily participated in a gathering of women at Sarvamangalatala Temple and then turns it into a class. She was very enthusiastic about teaching those women, all middle-aged housewives, who were learning very fast and Satya feels immense pleasure in this task. She describes her teaching experience thus: "Except for one

*or two, they are learning fast. If you saw them you would realize how eager they are to read the Puranas and the epics. It's so satisfying to see that."*<sup>13</sup> (394).

Ramkali loved her daughter very much and was worried about her future always. So, he offered her the property but Satya refused him saying 'No Baba!' Satya sobbed, 'I don't want it... I can claim only your love!' <sup>14</sup> (404) She did not had any kind of greed for property or money, she was just in need of freedom.

Bhabani, one of a village girl, who once criticized Satya for her odd behavior and demands later appreciated her decision to send Suvarnalata, her daughter, to school and marry her after she will complete her basic education.

She congratulates Satya and says:

I think it is a good idea that now a days they wait for girls to get a little older before marrying them off. A good thing too that you have started sending Subarna to school. It will increase her understanding and her strength. <sup>15</sup> (477).

But Satya's all dreams to educate her daughter and give her a better life, shattered when her mother-in-law married her off without telling it to Satya. Satya's whole world becomes dark because her one of the most cherished dream get shattered by her own husband and her mother-in-law. Thus in protest against this crime she took one of the boldest decisions of her life to leave her husband's house.

She no longer wore the thick gold bangles... free herself from that 'eternal bond.' Having released herself, Satya had left the village. <sup>16</sup> (529)...She avoided looking at Nabakumar's face, and said calmly, I'm going away forever <sup>17</sup> (531)

I'm climbing off your shoulders forever; I shall depend on my own feet and see if I can trust them to walk on Mother Earth. But that's also part of another question that I have.' <sup>18</sup> (532)

Finally, Satya had taken the boldest step of her life. She was feeling so free from her problems yet she had many questions from her father and from herself too. But her husband, Nabakumar, could not understand this all and felt agitated at her decision. He tried to stop her in any way, he said:

'That's exactly why a woman shouldn't have any property. You dare to reject your husband because you have the power of your father's property! It's not for a woman to be so daring. I tell you, you'll have a real hard time. That's my curse, as your husband!' <sup>19</sup> (532)

Nabakumar's male ego got hurt and he was not able to do anything so he was cursing his wife but Satya had understood that he was cursing her in anger, frustration, and shame. She Said:

'That's what you've all done since time began- as husbands, fathers, brothers or sons... our lives are cursed!' <sup>20</sup> (532)

She had already rebelled against the patriarchal system by leaving her house and husband but the whole mentality of a male mind she had revealed by mentioning that:

... the property you mention, let me tell you that I had forgotten completely about that tattered piece of paper. Now that you've reminded me, it would be an insult to throw away what my father has given me. If Sadhan and Saral grow up to be worthy boys, let them use it to build a school for girls in Tribeni. And ... tell them to name it "Bhubaneswari Vidyalaya." And wait- Satya wrapped the end of her sari around her neck

and touched her husband's feet, 'All my life I have said many wrong and hurtful things, and I've made you suffer a lot. Forgive me if you can.'<sup>21</sup>  
(532)

Satya had never run off from her duties whether as a daughter or a wife. She had the respect for her father that's why she accepted his property as a gift but at the same time, when her husband had raised a finger for it she had cleared the thing. She want that land to be used as a school and to be named at her mother's name, this shows her real quality as a daughter and as an individual too.

Satya was the pioneer of her age, because of her urge for freedom and her rebellious nature. She had setup new trends by educating her daughter, by protesting against the wrong notions of the society, by protesting against the patriarchy and finally by leaving her husband's home. She had put up the mile-stone for other women to fight for their rights and also for the emancipation for the whole woman folk. Finally, she raises the question that *Aren't women human?*<sup>22</sup> (391) and searched for the answer throughout her life and got success in it by emancipating other women.

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