

Ashapura Devi: A Jewel of a Writer

By arrangement with The Book Review

Anima Bose

WITH the passing away of Ashapura Devi, Bengal has lost a jewel of a writer and India an extraordinarily humane and compassionate author of truth and vision.

Ashapura Devi's short stories and novels have a great deal of information to give, specially about the women of Bengal. The myth of the Indian women in Bengal has been reinforced by epithets like "matrisama" and "devi" which create a vast illusion, putting women on a pedestal. There has developed an elaborate metaphysics about the all-enduring (Sarbang-Sahā), chaste, submissive quality of women, denying them simple human dignity, freedom and justice.

Ashapura's trilogy pays a tribute to those simple ordinary women who held out the first promise of their human potential amidst insurmountable obstructions and unspeakable heartbreaks. Published in 1964, Pratham Pratisrutī, (The First Promise) captured the readers' imagination and was hailed by critics in Bengal, bagging the Tagore Prize of the year. Subornolāta followed in 1966 as the second part of the trilogy with Bakulkatā (the saga of Bokul) forming the concluding title. The stories in this trilogy are not interdependent; the connecting thread is the portrait of the evolution of society through the decades. In that perspective the writer comes out as a successful novelist-sociologist using the characters, their life stories and the social situations as indeed of the changes that crept in, sometimes imperceptibly and sometimes with a shattering bang.

Ashapura did not look at human beings through the prism of any ideology or a preconceived notion. As a matter of fact, as one reads her works, one perceives that the writer does not evince anger, bitterness or malice even while she sketches quite a despicable character. It is so because she loved people, almost indulged them despite their smallness; their pettiness. Her strength lay in her empathy, her compassion for humankind. "Because human beings have to do and live with so little — they do not hesitate to hurt for very little," she said once when I interviewed her in March 1976 in Delhi; "because they are deprived, they attack hungrily."

Ashapura has been credited with looking at life in a totally new way and challenging the readers to pause and to take a look at the time-

worn traditional world of ours along with her in all honesty.

Ashapura Devi constantly questioned the values in some of the criteria society has set up. In Subornolāta for example, she asks why the death of a married woman with her children and husband around her is to be the be-all and end-all of her life on earth. Why is the girl-child in Bengal taught to pray ceaselessly for this kind of death? Daughter Bokul is considered lucky because "she could see her mother die" Why? Is any death scene pleasant? Are closed eyes, silenced voices very exciting? Bokul wonders; but not being a grown up person she did not dare ask why one has to be lucky to see one's own mother die. Or, why one is considered fortunate and blessed if one's first born is a son. If one's first grandchild is a grandson. Yet again, the son of a Brahmin must marry even if he is not earning a livelihood because "there is no shame if a Brahmin begs". Why? If a woman takes to education, specially if she learns English, her husbands is bound to die! Why? The writer ceaselessly questions the validity of these irrational criteria in her works.

Born in 1909, Ashapura Devi started writing at the age of 13. That she has continued to write since then, said Ashapura Devi (in the interview mentioned earlier), was because she was fortunate in not having her first offering stamped "rejected" by the editor — "a stroke of luck for me", she assured. Her first story of the adult readers was titled "Potni and Presyashi" (Wife and the Beloved). Her first novel was Prem-o-Proyojon. Ashapura has written innumerable novels and short stories — more than two hundred of them.

Behind the secret of her success perhaps lies the craft of Ashapura Devi which she had mastered with extraordinary deftness. Her realism, her economy of words, her poise and balance, her refined taste, and her utter honesty in "presenting as is", give her a unique place as a wielder of the pen. She faithfully portrayed the middle-class families, characters whom she had seen around her, whom she knew well. As she so often said in her conversations with me, "the world of my writing is the world I have seen" (Amar Dekhar Jogot Amar Lekhar Jogot — she had said in Bengali). She proved to be a sensitive receptacle of these impressions; she presented these impressions artistically but without trying to sit in judgement. As a deft writer, however, Ashapura chose the moment, a dramatic moment, the intensity

of which caused a shiver to run through the reader. The colour, the posture, the tilt compelled the readers to think as never before. And so through the window, the writer helped the readers see far beyond, in depth. As a painter, Ashapura Devi could have been an excellent impressionist as Ashish Bandopadhyaya said in his introduction to the second volume of her collected works. Her lines are not bold, but they do reveal a character. The shocks if any are rendered with a gentleness that is yet an eye opener. The finished product is well formed, full of excellent quality and leaves a lasting impression.

Ashapura Devi was a stylish writer with a style all her own. It might be relevant to mention that many including Gajendra K Mitra and Ashit K Bandopadhyaya took her to be a male writer which must have amused Ashapura Devino end. In the concluding part of the trilogy describing the emerging author, the heroine Bokul in the story says: "Who is this new Devi in the literary world? It must be the pseudonym of a male writer; the style is so forceful; as though forceful style is the monopoly of men alone!"

Very few Bengali writers have ventured into the field of psychoanalysis in their novels. Ashapura did. She was deft at delineating characters, specially women characters with the psychoanalytic approach. Abinetri (Actress), "Deslāier Buksho" (Matchbox) are just some examples besides the three central characters of her famous trilogy.

Ashapura was stylish in her use of words too. She often turned two nouns into an adjective, for example, "heem heem buk" (cold heart), "bokuni bokuni swar" (voice suggestive of scolding). She used unusual phrases in Bengali: moner gaye (the body of the mind), "ghatano ghatona" (planned happenings), "ana-neoa" (bring and take — very uniquely descriptive), "prossono-birokti" (pleasantly annoyed).

It has often been commented upon that although Ashapura Devi did not receive any formal education she nevertheless turned out to be a very successful writer. This point seems eminently irrelevant. Formal education in India's school/college/university, then and now does not prepare or equip anyone for creative writing. Moreover as Mani Shankar Mukherjee, the eminent Bengali author says, there are two kinds of writers: those who like the spider, weave with resources that come out of themselves.

Born on 8 January 1909 at Calcutta, Ashapura Devi spent her childhood in a large family in the northern part of the city. The family being highly conservative, did not encourage formal education for girls.

While Ashapura was still a child, her father Harendranath Gupta shifted to a rented house with his wife Saralāsundari Devi, three sons and three daughters. And one of the reasons that necessitated the change of residence was Saralāsundari Devi's love of books and journals. In joint family she could hardly find enough time to read. To quench her thirst for literature, she purchased almost every book of the Basumatī Sahitya Mandir, borrowed books from three leading libraries of the time and collected almost all leading literary journals. It was Saralāsundari Devi who, through her own life, transmitted the love for literature to the tender heart of Ashapura.

At the age of thirteen, Ashapura wrote and published her first creative piece, a poem, entitled *Bairer Dak* (The Call from the Outside) in Sishusathi. This marked the beginning of the odyssey of one of the most prolific creative personalities, who has authored 176 novels, 30 collections of short stories, 47 books for children and 25 other collections. In the year 1924, at age of 15, she was married to Kalidas Nag.

Her first collection of short stories for children entitled *Chhot Thakurdar Kashi Yatra* (The Departure of Younger Grandfather to Kashi) was published in 1938 and her first collection of short stories for adults was published in 1940.

Ashapura has been widely honoured with a number of prizes and awards. She received the Lila Prize from the University of Calcutta in 1954, the Bhuban Mohini Dasi Gold Medal from the same university in 1966, the Rabindra Memorial Prize from the Government of India in 1976. She has been conferred the D Litt (honoris causa) by the Universities of Jabalpur, Rabindra Bharati, Burdwan and Jadavpur in 1983, 1987, 1988 and 1990 respectively. Visva Bharati University honoured her with Desikottam in 1989. For her eminence as a novelist and short story writer, the Sahitya Akademi conferred its highest honour, the Fellowship, on Shrimati Ashapura Devi.

They work out a beautiful pattern and in their creativity turn to their inner resources. They do not depend on the outside for their creative work. There is also the other kind who gather all kinds of threads, like a weaver, from different places, different resources. Then they weave out a pattern in their work.



They have to look around and depend on the outside for the raw materials for creating. Ashapura Devi by virtue of being a woman writer who began writing the second decade of the 20th century had to depend on her inner resources. The outside world was not within her reach; nor could she collect the threads

from different places because she could not easily move about in the then outside world. Hers was the web of artistry and delicate patterns as those of the spider, her inner resources, her experiential moments presented in all integrity and truthfulness. She roused the social conscience of her time which

had become anesthetized for centuries, by presenting the entire spectrum of the saga of Bengali women, revealing the denials, the indignities and the inequities that had long been their lot. The intricate process of this denial and inequity had often left women bereft of even the simplest of courtesies between

man and woman, between two human beings. Ashapura Devi spoke up on their behalf to the end.

The writer has been translating novels and short stories by Ashapura Devi into English since 1978. She is now translating Bokulkatha.

Fighting Americans Again

Twenty years after defeating the Americans, Vietnam is at war again: this time against an invasion of American culture.

Andrew Nette of Inter Press Service reports.

IN his cluttered office at the state publishing house in Hanoi, Huu Ngoc is preparing for Vietnam's Third War of Resistance, this time to protect Vietnamese

culture from the influence of negative Western values.

Outside on the streets, billboards for the icons of Western materialism — television sets, lingerie, and soft

drinks — loom over swarms of Japanese mopeds on the streets.

"Over the course of this century we have successfully defeated the French and

Americans on the field of battle," he says. "But the current assault by materialism and modern living is the most serious threat yet."

The 76-year-old journalist

and commentator is among a growing number of intellectuals and officials alarmed by the cultural costs of a decade of rapid economic reform, known as *doi moi*.

"Because of 30 years of war and the mistakes of our economic line, there is an urgency to catch up with other South-east Asian countries and the world," says Ngoc. "(To improve the nation's standard of living) we need to practise the open-door policy, above all to the West with its science and technology."

"Should we be capable of resisting the attack of material modes of life which lead us to cancel out our cultural identity?" he adds. "It is no use gaining (economic) victory if Hanoi is to become another Bangkok."

"To open the door on economic development is good, but some areas in moral and cultural affairs cause us some concern," says poet Pham Tien Duat, deputy head of external relations at the Writers Association of Vietnam. "How do we have economic development while preserving the colour of our culture?"

After decades of isolation, Vietnam has seen an explosion of foreign ideas, media and values in recent years. Billboards dot road sides throughout the country, and government-run television is

dominated by reruns of Western soap operas.

Foreign videos have decimated Vietnam's once-thriving film industry, and writers can no longer find a market for their work "unless they give up their spirit to run after sex and violence," says Ngoc.

Drastic cutbacks in state funding for arts and culture have added further pressure towards commercialisation.

Communist Party leaders and government officials blame deteriorating cultural values on an upsurge of social evils including prostitution, drug abuse and graft.

Media reports point to a booming underground production and import of prohibited videos, books and magazines, some under the patronage of state-owned publishing houses. Illegal distribution of pornographic materials is also said to be rampant.

But the impact of these changes has been most pronounced among those born after the end of the war in 1975. Vietnam's youth, especially in the cities, have reacted to the end of decades of military discipline and economic scarcity by adopting consumer values with a vengeance.

A nationwide survey this year of people aged 16-30 years showed 73 per cent cared most about work and careers. Only 21 per cent

were concerned about democracy and social equity and 20 per cent the nation's security, a result unthinkable a decade ago.

"The young want to enjoy material life," notes Ngoc. "Most seem to be depoliticised, and this is not proper for Vietnam."

While this situation reflects trends among many of Asia's rapidly industrialising nations, it is disturbing to Vietnam's leaders, who fear that in the scramble for profits the nation's youth will forget the sacrifices of their elders.

"The danger is all too obvious: a section of our youth has broken off from the national cultural tradition," wrote Huy Can, president of the Union of Literature and Arts Associations in a recent column in the English-language daily *Vietnam News*. "The consequences of this rupture are inestimable."

"The cultural identity of the Vietnamese people is the most important factor in preserving our national spirit and will of national independence. This has allowed us to withstand and resist foreign influences, no matter how great they may be."

He calls for a "spiritual and moral resistance" against the pervasiveness of Western culture. "It will be very difficult, but we have to mobilise our potential."

Can sees the intrusion of

Western values as part of a "dark scheme of imperialist forces which are intent on cultural aggression against our nation."

Observers attribute such sentiments to wider insecurities on the part of conservative sections of the Communist Party and the military over the pace and scale of reform.

While welcoming Washington's decision in July to normalise ties, Vietnam has made it clear it will not accept human rights conditions as a precondition for economic cooperation.

Although some analysts detect a backlash against the growing foreign presence here, others say Hanoi is using the breathing space provided by recent diplomatic successes to move against foreigners engaged in illegal activities.

Officials have stressed the need to protect traditional Vietnamese values of respect for authority and compassion towards the underprivileged. Hanoi is said to be considering compulsory education about Vietnamese culture to preserve national identity, and is reviewing funding for the arts.

Said Can: "We are beginning to realise that some areas, like education and the arts, need subsidies and should not be totally thrown open to the rules of the market."



1960s



1990s

culture