

# **The Fragmented Other: Mothers and Wives in the Selected Short Stories of Ashapura Devi**

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# PREFACE

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This thesis is about the treatment of women characters by Ashapura Devi in her short stories. In India there is a popular tendency of compartmentalizing women in several domestic roles such as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters etc. Gradually in her strenuous effort to fit into those roles, which are not natural but are only created by a male dominated society to put forward the 'ideal' of Indian culture and tradition through the purity of its women, she somehow loses her own individual self. She starts to imagine her identity in relation to others, especially in relation to men. Ashapura Devi's short stories interested me because writing in an age when women in mainstream literature were objectified she focussed on the daily life of women, the mundane. Her short stories take us to a journey where she unravels the gigantic possibilities that a woman has as an individual. Ashapura writes from inside the structure, of the structure and then she subtly subverts the structure. This thesis seeks to understand Ashapura's position as a woman writer and how she is representing the 'Other' in her short stories.

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## Introduction

The endeavour to retrieve the lost history of women is largely due to American feminist criticism. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* has been one of the torchbearers in this context. Published in 1969 the work traces the images of women as portrayed in mainstream literary practices. The work's criticism of the stereotypical representation of women in mainstream literature under the garb of universality turned the attention of feminist critics to the works of women authors for more reliable representation of their own sex. Mary Anne Ferguson's 1973 work *Images of Women in Literature* points to the stereotypical representation of women in mainstream literature in various compartmentalized roles such as mothers, submissive wives, women as seductresses and as muses for male creation. She argued that it is only through the works of women writers that the real world of women can gain voice into literary works. In her seminal work *A Literature of Their Own* published in 1977 Elaine Showalter, while tracing the literary tradition of women's writing from the 1840s to the present day, provided the works of women writers with the much awaited and much needed scholarly attention through her painstaking analysis of the lives and works of both the great and minor novelists by placing them against the socio-cultural and political background in which the ordinary women of that time lived. In their 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar seek to explore a distinct female literary tradition and the response it generates towards existing male literary assertions. The work emphasizes on how the nineteenth century women strived to get rid of their anxiety regarding authorship and harked back their foremothers to regain their unique feminine power. In India, however, besides the much debated women's issue during the reformist era, the women's issue as a movement gained momentum during the 1970s. Along with the working class struggles, trade union movements, and demands for an organization to protect



the democratic rights, women's movement also attained new heights during this period. As Roshan G. Shahani and Shoba V. Ghosh argue in their article, "Indian Feminist Criticism: in Search of New Paradigms", "Like its Western counterpart Women's movement in India was an integral part and inevitable product of a world and a time when, at various individual and organizational levels the status quo was being challenged." (Shahani 3813) As a backlash of multiple repressions a spirit of collective awareness was noticed wherein the class struggle and gender issue found a common ground to fight. During this time of turbulence an endeavour was noticed to focus on the lost histories of women and women's writing in the form of diary writing, letters and autobiographies. This fresh research on women's writing and history resulted in renewed critical focus on histories of the Indian reform and nationalist movements. Phenomenal works such as *Recasting Women* by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, and *Women Writing in India* by Tharu and Lalita provided the readers with the experiential, historical, social and cultural ground to rethink upon.

Ashapura Devi, who started writing from the early twentieth century, was at the height of her literary career at this time. She was honoured with the prestigious Jnanpith award during the late 1970s. Writing exclusively about the private lives of men and women Ashapura has created a fictional world that buzzes with the unheard voices of women confined behind the closed doors and windows of Bengali middle class households. She seeks to explore the widely neglected personal experiences of women and gives voice to these historically ignored lives of humankind. A prolific writer of Bengali literature, Ashapura Devi is particularly renowned for her short stories which almost are more than a thousand and a half in number and her novels, especially her magnum opus, the *Satyabati Trilogy*. Ashapura started her literary career as early as at the age of thirteen. Her first work, which was a poem, was published in the popular

children's magazine, "Shishusathi". She began her career with children's writing. Her first short story for adults was not published until she was twenty-eight. She began her career as an adult short story writer with the famous "Patni O Preyosi" (The Wife and the Beloved), which was published in the renowned Bengali daily *Anandabazar Patrika* in 1936-37. During her long literary career she published about hundred and fifty novels and numerous short stories. To understand the subject matter and the treatment of women's issues in her literary works it is crucial to understand her personal life as well. Born in an extremely orthodox family to Harendranath Gupta and Saralasundari Devi in 1909 Ashapura was not allowed to have any formal education. In her interview to Chitra Deb she recalls,

Since my family was conservative, girls were not sent to school; I was no exception to be given an opportunity either. But I have always read stories and novels. My mother had a passion for literature. (269)

Discussing the contribution of her mother in her life and career she narrates,

Whatever little Bengali I learnt to read and write was at home and due to mother's initiative. My mother was very fond of reading books. She was a regular reader of literary books published by Basumati... 'Ma' was a member of three libraries. From childhood I used to read wolfishly all those books without anybody's knowledge—I was never choosy about books. While reading I had a feeling that I may write as well. (Chatterjee 260)

Ashapura was married off at the early age of fifteen to an equally conservative family but she did not stop writing. Her husband, Kalidas Gupta, was supportive of her literary career. In her lifetime Ashapura received numerous honours and awards including a gold medal from Calcutta

University in 1963, and the Jnanpith Award, India's most prestigious literary honour, in the year 1976. She was awarded the Golden Lotus Award by the Government of India in the same year. In 1994 she was made a Fellow by the prestigious Sahitya Bharati Academy. Although never a self-proclaimed feminist, Ashapura's rebellious writings can be considered as protests against injustices to women of which she herself had a firsthand knowledge.

In spite of such a vast range of literary creations to her credit, scholarly works on Ashapura has been surprisingly limited to her three great novels, *Pratham Pratisruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bakul Katha*, popularly known as the *Satyabati Trilogy*. Although Ashapura more than once confessed that the trilogy has certainly brought her fame but her first love has always been short story writing, interestingly there are very few works that focuses on her short fiction. Since there is a limited number of research works on her short fiction, while writing this thesis I focused on mainly the introductions to her short story collections and articles on her short stories published in different books and journals. One of the most important works on her short stories is done by the Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri. In her introduction to Ashapura's collection of selected short stories published under the title *Matchbox*, Lahiri emphasises on the setting of her short stories, the interior space. After a discussion of the various discourses on domesticity in literature Lahiri goes on to find out the significance of the 'home' in relation to the outside world in Ashapura Devi's short stories. While discussing the importance of the private in Ashapura's stories Lahiri focuses on the setting of her stories and the other technical aspects such as characterization and narrative style. In her extraordinary discussion of Ashapura's works, her primary focus is the geographical location and the setting of the stories. The chapter four of this thesis discusses the philosophical notion of 'home' not in relation with the outside world as Lahiri has already done in her research work but in relation to its

significance in the lives of the women. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is important in this context for it helps to understand 'home' as an abstract space that shelters the unconscious. It points to the importance of the interior space and its different components. Bachelard finds home, the private as the phenomenological space where human experience reaches its ultimate height. The chapter tries to understand the idea of 'home' as an abstract notion by interpreting and analysing different short stories of Ashapura Devi and seeks to explore the causes hidden behind the indomitable wish found in her women characters to possess a 'home' of their own.

Apart from Lahiri's outstanding work, there are introductions to her short stories by eminent literary figures which help to understand the nature of her works. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her introduction to the Bengali short story collection, *Ashapura Debir Chhotogolpo: Lekhikar Dwara Nirvacita*, tries to unravel the veiled meaning in her stories. Sen focuses on the author's approach towards women in her short fiction as she argues that although Ashapura never overtly protested against the system, the rebellious nature of her works can be read as silent and subtle protest against the chauvinistic world that we inhabit. Ujjwal Kumar Majumdar in his introduction to Ashapura's short story collection, *Bachhai Galpo*, writes about her engagement with the individual psychology and the mysteries of human personality in her characters. One of the most significant works on Ashapura Devi in recent times is Dipannita Dutta's extensive research on the author's life and writing against the backdrop of feminist awareness in India. Dutta's outstanding work published under the title, *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio Critical Reading*, casts critical light upon Ashapura Devi's position as a woman writer in the context of changing cultural scenarios in India. The book provides the readers with a profound insight on Ashapura's critical position as a woman author in the

feminist discourse of Bengal and the international feminist consciousness as well. Her work also explores Ashapura's position in the colonial and post colonial discourse of Indian culture.

This thesis primarily deals with the notion of motherhood and wifehood as is portrayed by Ashapura Devi in her short fiction. Motherhood as a contested discourse emerged in India during the nationalist era. Jasodhara Bagchi, an eminent critic and feminist, traces the development of this discourse in her article, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal". She argues that the idea of motherhood was used as a phenomenon to create a myth about women's power while at the same time it deprived her of any real exercisable authority. She explores the political ideology hidden behind the making of the 'ideal mother' during the nationalist era in Bengal when the concept of motherhood was used as the "overt symbol of patriarchal control over the notion of womanhood." (66) Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* attempts to analyze motherhood as an institution. Rich argues that unlike most other institutions motherhood cannot be seen or touched, therefore it is most dangerous as one does not even get to realize that she is imprisoned. Rich also explores the mother's relation with the daughter. She argues that in a patriarchal society a mother's relation with the daughter becomes complex and problematic as the daughter starts to understand the mother's victimization as the main cause of her own victimhood. Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya's book *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* explores the subject of motherhood from different philosophical and political perspectives as it has been used to shape the actual lives of mothers in the Indian subcontinent. The work brings home the significance of literal and metaphorical understanding of motherhood in urban India against the backdrop of prevailing ideologies of the concept. Apart from a discussion of the prevalent dominant discourse of the narrative of *Devi* in the context of

Indian maternity, Aneja and Vaidya's work critically traces the idea of motherhood as is represented in popular cultural mediums like art and cinema. In the renowned book, *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?*, edited by Maithreyi Krishnaraj, through various articles it has been argued that maternity has its own mysteries and limitations. While it is an enigmatic experience, it also comes at the cost of the mother sacrificing her own individual dreams and desires for the child. Once a mother, a woman is not expected to have any desire for her own self, her life is expected to surround the child. As these works contemplate on the idea of a stereotyped motherhood as a politically charged metaphor, the discourse regarding women as wives emerge out in the path breaking work, *Hindu Wife and Hindu Nation*, by Tanika Sarkar. Sarkar tries to trace the development of Hindu nationalism in her work against the backdrop of the changing cultural scenarios in Bengal during the nineteenth century. She focuses on the middle class of Bengal, especially the condition of Bengal's middle class women, which was going through several changes at that time. She attempts to unravel several other neglected narratives beyond the dominant narrative of colonial dominance and native resistance. Sarkar discusses at length the political motives behind the formation of several laws for women during the nationalist era and the one dominant discourse that caught the attention of the nineteenth century Hindu intelligentsia, and that was the formation of an identity for the Hindu wife. Apart from Tanika Sarkar's work, Uma Chakravarti's essay, *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?*, published in Sangari and Vaid's seminal work, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, also helps to understand the motives behind the creation of 'ideal wife' during the British Raj. Chakravarti argues that the cultural nationalism in India during the nineteenth century propagated the idea of equality of women in marriage as the *sahadharmini* in its attempt to rediscover the 'lost glorious past' of the Hindu natives. She mentioned the lives and experiences

of Pandita Ramabai and Rukmabai to emphasize on the stark difference between the real condition of women and the theoretical ideal that was imposed upon them to prove the Aryan lineage of Hindu natives to the foreign rulers. Apart from the historical understanding of the creation of roles of mothers and wives for women, it is also important to understand the position of women within domesticity in Hindu and at large in Indian culture. The famous Indian psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar's works are crucial in this context. Kakar's *The Inner World* and *Intimate Relations* deal with the social position of Indian women as mothers and wives. His elaborate research on Indian psyche and the creation of relations, in this context the making of specific boxed roles for women, familiarises us with the nuances and complexities of social relations. Apart from this critically acclaimed works Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's, *Women Writing in India*, is another phenomenal work that traces the history of women and women writers from as early as 600 BC till the twentieth century. The exceptionally well researched work by Tharu and Lalita makes us familiar with the changing history of women in India before and after independence. In mainstream literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century women were often the centre of attention in the writings of the renowned novelists of Bengal. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay imagined the nation as the Mother in his most celebrated novel, *Anandamath*, where he glorifies the mother-son relation and emphatically points that the glory of the mother must be protected through the bravery of her Hindu sons. Caught between the popular debate of tradition and modernity during the nineteenth century Bankim Chandra in his work "Prachina O Nabina", an essay written on the understanding of traditional and modern in Indian women, argues to preserve the virtues of Hindu tradition in Indian women against the growing tides of modernity. While Bankim Chandra was clear about what the ideal woman should be like, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, another renowned writer of Bengal, took an ambivalent stance

towards his portrayal of women. While in his works he let the woman indulge in expressions of their desires, at the same time influenced by the ongoing social debates of his time, he denied agency to women for the sake of overall good of humankind. Therefore he considers Rajlaxmi, the chaste virtuous widow turned prostitute in the popular novel *Shrikanto*, as the ‘false ideal’. Women occupied the centre in the works of the most popular Bengali writer of all times, Rabindranath Tagore. It is not an easy task to understand Tagore’s portrayal of women in his works. As Jasodhara Bagchi aptly puts it in her essay “Tagore and Woman: Some Thoughts”, “Tagore’s presentation of women has always been subtle, self-contradictory and subversive of the usual politics of gender representation.” (17) Tagore had often suffered to resolve the concept of true feminine. While in one of his earliest poems, *Kori O Komol*, he attributed women with both emotional and physical strength, in his controversial respond to Pandita Ramabai’s lecture the same Tagore was found arguing, “From whichever angle you may see, it is Nature’s dictum that women are not meant for work other than the domestic. Has Nature’s intention been otherwise girls would have had inborn strength.” (Lal 12) Tagore’s idea of woman has gone through drastic changes as we understand it through the representation of women in his renowned novels like *Ghare Baire* and *Sheser Kobita* where he renounces the stereotypes. In stories like “Strir Patra”, “Denapaona” and novels like *Jogajog* we find Tagore’s observation of the multiple possibilities lying in femininity. His renewed understanding of women can be found in his essay “Nari” (Women),

For a long while, the systems of human civilisation was in the hands of men alone. He had created the politics, economy, and the rule of law of society. Women had remained behind, hidden, unexpressed, devoting themselves to the home. This civilisation was one-sided because it had missed the treasures of so many human hearts and minds that had



stayed locked like a miser's wealth within. Today, the doors to those locked chambers stand open [...] Everyday, the woman of the home can be seen as the woman of the world, this occasion results in the addition of other new minds and hearts to the creative impulse of human civilisation, to bring to it new radiance. (Tagore 261-262)

Ashapura belonged to the following generation of Bankim, Sarat and Rabindranath. By the time she started writing Tagore was advancing towards the end of his life and career. Bankim Chandra passed away long before she was even born in 1894 and Sarat Chandra died in 1938, two years after she published her first short story. Notwithstanding the formal honours and prestigious awards she received during her career as a Bengali author, Ashapura was often dismissed as the 'domestic' writer. She remained marginalised as a woman author in the literature of Bengal. Understanding Ashapura's position within the literary context of Bengal calls for an understanding of the literature of her time. Ashapura started writing her short stories when the Kallol movement, the first conscious literary movement in Bengal, was just set out. Determined to establish modernism in Bengali literature the movement started off with a group of writers, who influenced by Marxist and Freudian theory, were trying to cater to a world traumatised by the post-war horrors. It was the era following the popular and highly influential era of Bankim-Sarat-Tagore. A conscious effort was made by a handful of young and bold writers and poets like Premendra Mitra, Buddhadeb Basu, Mohitlal Majumdar and Bishnu De to nullify the sentimental worship of nature's beauty and the Tagorean romanticism. They were the next generation of writers. They deliberate broke the nationalist ideal of motherhood and domestic love by replacing them with naked passions and desire through their sexist writing in order to shock the reader. Writing during this time, when Bengali literature was going through major changes in its approach towards the world, Ashapura exclusively dealt the mundane lives

of women, therefore came her inevitable dismissal as the mere 'domestic writer', who wrote about the 'insignificants' of daily lives. But what was ignored in the process of oversimplifying Ashapura's works was the subversion that she engaged in while treating the domestic and mundane. Ashapura consciously drew her characters from the structured life of domesticity, she relocated her women within the boxed roles of mothers and wives and then she challenged the structures. Given the conservative ambience of her private family life Ashapura, unlike the 'rebellious' writers, witnessed the reality of women's everyday lives from the close quarters of her home. Ashapura, herself Otherised in the then contemporary literary scenario of Bengal, took the gendered Other as the subject of her short stories and then she took it as a challenge to break the tradition of stereotyped, sexist representation of women in popular mainstream literature.

To Ashapura Devi the private space served as the primary setting where the complexities of human emotions and psychology are at free play. Although the geographical location of Ashapura's short stories is the private space of urban and semi-urban middle class Bengali households, the issues that she deals with in the stories raises questions regarding the stereotypical character sketches of women in mainstream literature. The existing literary scholarship on Ashapura Devi mainly deals with her novels, especially the trilogy. As far as her short fiction is concerned a general feminist approach has been often employed to understand her works. Surprisingly a close analysis of her short stories and the characterization of women by Ashapura, where she is constantly interrogating the normative homogenous understanding of women in various socially defined roles, have hardly found its way in the research investigations of recent times. This thesis therefore tries to fill the void by specifically focussing on the socially prescribed structured roles of women as mothers and wives and Ashapura's treatment of it. For

the sake of brevity in this thesis there are only eighteen chosen short stories which serve as examples of Ashapura's understanding and representation of women. Apart from notable writers like Nabaneeta Dev Sen, critics have either belittled her work by tagging it as 'domestic', therefore trivial, or they have completely ignored it. The thesis argues against this popular inclination towards dismissing her works as 'domestic' without comprehending and exploring the multi dimensional meanings they possess. As the politically charged notion of motherhood and wifehood continues to present to us a hypothetical and masked understanding of women that hardly matches the reality, Ashapura uses the long neglected interior space, the private to interrogate the truth quotient of the structured ideas of femininity. In each of her stories Ashapura focuses on the multiple aspects of femininity only to subvert the normative ideas they possess. In her stories women are not helpless, unaware of their domination. They are often manipulative and take responsibilities of their action. Even when there is surrender to domination it is used as a ploy to lash out at the partiality and double standards of society. Ashapura takes the subject of motherhood and then deconstructs it to explore the neglected fragmentary nature of it. According to Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, editors of *Noon in Calcutta*, a Bengali short story anthology, Ashapura's stories lack 'political punch'. In this paper I would like to argue that Ashapura's position as a woman writer cannot be simplified and dismissed as such. Ashapura in her stories not only disrupts the stereotypical image of womanhood presented in mainstream literary discourses but also gives voice to the hitherto unspoken aspects of women's lives. Since a major number of her short stories deal with women within marriage and family, the private space, home is her primary setting. But home as a domestic plane is not just a physical space, it contains multi layered meanings. In her works it emerges as a contested space where women indulge in negotiation with patriarchy in their everyday lives. While she digs deep into

the complex psyche of her women characters playing various prescribed roles in the domestic platform, motherhood and wifedom emerge as important ones. Ashapura consciously breaks the concept of 'archetypal mother' and 'ideal wife' and presents her as a flesh and blood woman. She nullifies the fixity attached to Indian woman as mother and wife, and keeps it fragmented. In her heart wrenching description in the stories Ashapura shows the hidden and unexplored realities of womanhood in literature. In her essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality" she writes: "Women have always been misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood". (19) Criticising the age old notion of womanhood she comments: "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) In all her works Ashapura has always tried to break this mystery attached with femininity. But Ashapura's works has been seen with suspicion by critics. 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) In this thesis I would like to contradict this observation and would argue that Ashapura's world is a mirror where the harsh reality is reflected. Ashapura claims that she writes what she sees, what she experiences around her. The surrender of her rebellious characters is not because the author is conforming to tradition rather it is a strategic move by the author as a woman to point to the necessity of solidarity among women as the only way of rescue from this oppression. As she quite practically writes, "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)

This thesis comprises of four chapters, each dealing with a different issue in relation to the selected short stories by Ashapura Devi. The chapters discuss at length the different problematic that I found crucial in understanding Ashapura’s short fiction. There are eighteen short stories discussed at length in four chapters based on their subject matter and treatment of issues related to women’s experience in a male governed world order. By analysing the stories the thesis tries to put a critical light on Ashapura’s position as a woman writer writing in the twentieth century and how she observes and understands the complexities of the socially prescribed roles women are made to follow. The first chapter is titled “Disrupting the Metaphor: The Fragmented Mother”. As the title suggests it seeks to discuss the politicized metaphor of motherhood in the domestic life of Bengal’s middle class. In this chapter there are five stories, “Chhinamasta”, “Bhoy”, “Sthirchitra”, “Jaliyat” and “Kasai”, which discuss the idea of motherhood as is understood and portrayed by Ashapura. In all the five stories Ashapura takes the subject of motherhood as it is understood in Indian context, especially in Bengal’s middle class and then she consciously subverts it. In “Chhinamasta”, Jayabati, the mother is seen to wish for her daughter-in-law’s widowhood which means her son’s death in order to take the revenge of humiliations inflicted on her. Her object of love, her only son turns into the weapon used by her rival, her daughter-in-law, Pratibha to insult her. Jayabati’s character unsettles the reader when instead of regretting her wish, which is the normative expectation from her, she smiles upon her victory. Another story “Bhoy” narrates the metamorphoses of Drabamoyee from a young

mother to an old woman clinging on to life. Drabamoyee's perpetual pregnancy keeps her locked within the boundaries of maternity. The story discusses how a woman's existence is measured against her motherhood. Drabamoyee was mocked by all as she refused to die after her last son's death. Once a proud mother of her children, she became a subject of contempt once she lost her children. Motherhood is the central theme of the story "Sthirchitra" as well. In the story Sati Sen, the mother of Dibyakumar Sen, plans to make a memorial temple for her son in her new house built with the compensatory money of her his untimely death. Just before the day of inauguration Sati learns that her son is not dead, he is maimed but is alive. All her dreams of decorating the new house with the memories of her bright young son are devastated with the news of him being alive. The story shows how the grief of son, which fades away after a certain time, is used as a defense mechanism to fulfill her own desire to have a home. In another two stories in this chapter, "Jaliyat" and "Kasai", questions have been raised regarding the responsibility of parenting a child. In most cases the mother is hold responsible if the child fails to meet the expectation of the father. Ashapura points how a woman's vulnerability as a mother is used by the society to question her responsibility towards the child. In "Kasai" Kamala, trapped in the claustrophobic ambience of a joint family, is alleged as responsible for the death of her child. Kamala's helplessness points to the inhumanity that a woman as a mother is subjected to inside the boundaries of her home. On the other hand in "Jaliyat" the author questions the responsibility of the father towards the children. Santwana, in "Jaliyat", is a victim of opportunistic patriarchy, where the father takes the credit of the children's success but does not take the responsibility of bringing them up.

The second chapter is titled, “Love, Spite, and Deception: Mothers and Daughters”. In this chapter there are four stories, “Banchak”, “Padatik”, “Shok” and “Bibi Begamer Shibtala”, which help us to understand how Ashapura dealt with the often neglected mother-daughter dynamic in her short stories. Daughters, unlike sons, find their identity not in separation with the mother, but with the continuity of the mother’s self. Biological similarity with the mother also help them to share the feminine experience with her as well, although there has also been noticed a tendency to surpass the mother in order to overcome the domination that victimized her. Ashapura delves deep into the psychological and emotional realms of her characters to explore the complexities of this relation. “Banchak” is a tale of a mother who is labeled as betrayer by the society for hiding her daughter’s widowhood so that she can have a few more hours of happiness. Anindita’s duty as a mother is questioned by her husband when he found out that she tried to hide the news of her son-in-law’s death. The story raises poignant questions regarding society’s attitude to widows and also a mother’s sympathetic understanding, and the father’s inability as a man to understand the pangs of being a widow. In “Padatik” the mother-daughter relation surrounds the debated discourse of housework as labor. Jayanti, a working woman, detests her mother for complaining of the housework all the time. She considers Sabitri’s work to be inferior to her own job which brings the family money. Born and brought up in an androcentric world, Jayanti fails to comprehend her mother. Her discovery of her own self as a woman happens when she had to replace Sabitri. Sharing the same domestic position with her mother she realizes the value of her mother’s work. “Bibi Begamer Shibtala” has its similarities to “Banchak” but it is set in a different historical time. It is the tragic story of Giribala and her mother. Giribala’s mother gives away her life in a desperate act of saving her daughter from the atrocities of widowhood. It also indicates to society’s indifference towards

women's history. The history of the temple established by the Begum of the nawab is desolated and forlorn like the forlorn histories of women's struggle. Another important story, discussed in this chapter, is "Shok". "Shok" explores another dynamic of this complex relation. The protagonist, Deepa, takes the entire responsibility of the household after her father's death. Her mother's perpetual illness compels her to play the role of a substitute mother to her younger siblings. But Deepa becomes the object of envy to her mother as she finds her not as the desired identical double but as the 'Other'. Thus the four selected stories are interpreted to explore the multi-layered dynamics of this relation. Ashapura subtly shows the psychological complexities of the relation that a mother shares with her daughter.

The third chapter is "Matchbox: The Troubled Wedlock". Besides motherhood, women have been traditionally made to play the structured role of an 'ideal Hindu wife'. The chapter begins with a discussion of the position of women as wives in Hindu religious texts, especially *Manusamhita*. The chapter also focuses on the women's issue which gained momentum during the reformist era in Bengal and the emphasis on the duties of a wife. The chapter discusses five stories in this regard, "Deshlai Baksho", "Ja Noy Tai", "Sambhram", "Behaya" and "Taser Ghor". While in "Deshlai Baksho", "Ja Noy Tai" and "Sambhram" the female protagonists ultimately after much psychological conflict and verbal protests yield to the pressures of domesticity, in "Taaser Ghor" and "Behaya" they resist and demand agency. Although in the first three stories the protagonists surrender to social pressure it should not be interpreted as the author's own submissive nature, rather their submission causes an atmosphere of suffocation which compels the reader to experience the claustrophobic position of women in domesticity as well. The chapter argues how women as wives, like as mothers, are not compartmentalized in Ashapura's stories. While some of them submit to the social pressures, which might be argued



as the strategic writing of the author, others resist and exercise agency. In the last two stories, “Taaser Ghor” and “Behaya” the characters of Mamata and Maloti fight for their honor and rights. Ashapura compares women to matchbox, she asserts that women are full of the fire of rebellion against any oppression, what they lack is the recognition of that fire inside them.

One of the interesting characteristics of her women characters is their fascination with the idea of a ‘home’. Most of her female protagonists desire a home for themselves. The fourth chapter which is titled, “In Search of Her ‘Home’: Exploring Topophilia”, seeks to understand this idea of home as is narrated by Ashapura in her stories. Topophilia is the celebration of the interior space called home which provides shelter to imagination. Through the interpretation and analysis of four short stories, “Cactus”, “Kankabatir Itikatha”, “Hatiyar”, and “Paka Ghar”, the chapter seeks to unravel the different possible significations of home. The home serves as the primary setting for most of Ashapura’s stories and most of her female protagonists desire a home for which they strive all their lives. The meaning of this ‘home’ cannot be limited to concrete space only. In her short stories ‘home’ becomes the metaphor for the autonomous space which the women earnestly wish for themselves. In “Cactus” home becomes the centre of the lives of the characters and seeking a home reveals to them the subjective meaning of it. In “Kankabatir Itikatha” ‘home’ almost becomes synonymous with the female body, the site of restriction and possible freedom. In “Hatiyar” the demand over the space is used as a weapon to maintain dignity and honor within society and in “Paka Ghar” home becomes the contested space which gives birth to conflict and understanding at the same time. Thus the four chapters in this thesis point to four different aspects of Ashapura Devi’s short stories. While the characters are fictional, the problems we witness them suffering are real. Be it submission or overt protest her stories through their narrative strength strategically brings the readers down to the same plane

with her female characters and thus give them a close view along with empathetic understanding of the lives of women within the confined quarters of domesticity.

The combination of textual analysis and discourse analysis has been employed as research methodologies while proceeding through the research work. Through discourse analysis I sought to understand the existing scholarship on Ashapura Devi's short fiction and tried to find out the gaps that are yet to be filled. Theoretical approach has been taken while understanding the complexities of the texts and the position of the author as a woman writer. The thesis is primarily written from the perspective of different feminist theories while unraveling the subtle gender power play that the author seeks to point at while presenting a deconstructed form of existing social roles for women.

## Chapter I

### Disrupting the Metaphor: The Fragmented Mother

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, time and again, is used as a ploy to curb their freedom. In case of India the popular notion of motherhood is shaped, constructed and is highly influenced by the mythologies and popular legends of the land. The imagination of the people of the sub continent borrows heavily from the maternal iconography presented in its mythologies. The mother must be kind, generous, de-sexualized persona with a self sacrificing nature and one who should be devoid of any kind of desire for herself. According to eminent feminist writer, V. Geetha, "Amongst Hindus, the mother is a model woman, self sacrificing, heroic and essentially noble". (14) This particular idea of motherhood has 'raised' the status of the Indian mother from a normal flesh and blood woman to that of a divine energy, a *Devi*. While discussing the Indian psyche regarding the concept of motherhood Sudhir Kakar, a renowned psychoanalyst, in his famous 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 an important role in this context since they shape the imagination and belief of the mass. Kakar emphasizes that “Myths in India are not part of a bygone era....Vibrantly alive; their symbolic power intact, Indian myths constitute a cultural idiom that aids the individual in the construction and integration of his inner world.” (135) Although there are ample numbers of goddesses in Hindu mythology, as opposed to other cultures, who are equated with *Shakti*, in real life women are hardly given any exercisable power in Hindu society. As Vrinda Dalmiya in her essay “The Indian Subcontinent” aptly puts it, “Such postulation of female goddesses, of course, is not in itself a feminism; in fact the transcendental-empirical dichotomy may be a compensatory device that gives to women in the other worldly realm what they are denied in the empirical world.” (122) Discussing the mythologies regarding the concept of motherhood in her essay “Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal” Jasodhara Bagchi, a renowned feminist scholar and activist, writes, “It has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power.” (65) The notion of motherhood, based on its mythological definitions and attributes, was reshaped and reconstructed during the Indian nationalist era, especially in Bengal, in order to help in the formation of the growing idea of nationalism and a national identity for the colonized Hindu male. The imagined community, the country, was defined as a mother and it proved to be more effective to arouse the national fervor among the natives than a few geographical lines drawn on a paper. Criticized severely for their ill treatment of their women in the name of child marriage, atrocious rituals of widowhood, and burning the widows, the bourgeois nationalism of nineteenth century India, especially in Bengal, saw the image of the mother as one of the major positive grounds to challenge the superiority of the colonizers. It started with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

presenting the image of the mother as a metaphor to the country in his proto-nationalist novel, *Anandamath* and found a politicized nature of its own in the contemporary nationalist scenario in Bengal. The mythologized, proverbial popular image of the Bengali mother was the only option left, apart from forming a model for the 'ideal wife', to claim the lost honor of the enslaved natives from the foreign rulers. It is also to be noticed that it was the mother son relation that was emphasized, and the glory of the mother was validated and justified by the masculine greatness of her Hindu warrior sons. To women, apart from being bestowed with unsolicited 'greatness', it reemphasized her limited identity as the fertile land to plough seeds upon, limited to childbirth and nurturing, even better if she was unfed and uncared for as this became another moral ground to claim social superiority over the west. 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, profession that were being wrested by their men and glorifying motherhood only through her reproductive power. (65)

The ideology of motherhood, as Bagchi found it, which 'rested on a show of the empowering of women' was in reality an attempt to bind her into the chains of more and more deprivation by asking her to sacrifice every wish and every desire to glorify her maternity. This overwhelmingly politicized patriarchal notion of motherhood did not die with the nationalist era rather it is still very popular in the imagination of the mass and continues to be a part 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 creature whose world revolves

around the well being of her sons (the relationship with daughters is hardly dealt with). Indian Cinema's preoccupation with the saccharine sweet mother son bond shows the obsession with having male children. Since motherhood is considered as natural to women, it has been used as a trope to limit her rights and if she begets sons, it provides her with a false sense of pride and power within the family. 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) Krishnaraj highlights "the pervasive respect that motherhood has in Indian culture as opposed to a woman as an individual". (2) While it ignores the multi dimensional possibility of a woman as an individual it is also to keep in mind that in most of the cases the woman is able to retain this 'respect' only if she gives birth to sons for it is a fact undeniable that a mother of daughters is the most ill treated member in Indian family.

In this chapter I will discuss mothers as they are depicted, envisioned and rediscovered in the short stories by Ashapura Debi, who witnessed the colonial as well as the postcolonial era. A major number of Ashapura Debi's short stories deal with women within marriage and family. While she digs deep into the complex psyche of her women characters playing various prescribed roles in the domestic platform, motherhood emerges as an important aspect. She takes us to the close quarters of the Bengali household and familiarizes us with the ground realities of everyday lives. Motherhood in her stories is no longer an ideology but lived experiences of women's day to day lives. Mothers in her stories are not *Devi* or *Shakti*, they do not have any 'divine capacity', and most importantly they are not godly creatures devoid of all desires. In her

creation she not only challenges the nationalist notion of motherhood but presents her own fragmented vision of the concept. The identity of the women portrayed as mothers are hardly limited to their reproductive functions and duties attached to it. Her characters as mothers have a voluminous range of emotions, which of course is not limited to sacrifice and selfless generosity. They are capable of all the feelings that a normal human being can have. They are real in the sense that they reveal to us the reality behind the imposed mask of divinity. Writing in the mid twentieth century Ashapura in her short stories not only challenges the constructed notion of motherhood, she often rejects and defies it. Although there is a large number of stories by Ashapura that puts a critical light on the subject of motherhood, making it a subject that needs more realistic approach, for the sake of brevity in this chapter I have chosen five short stories by Ashapura Devi which revolve around the concept of motherhood and the experiences that a woman goes through as a mother in middle class Bengali households. The five chosen stories, “Chhinamasta”, “Bhoy”, “Sthirchitra”, “Jaliyat” and “Kasai” show four different aspects of motherhood. While in “Chhinamasta” a mother’s hurt pride overshadows her love for her son, in “Bhoy” a mother becomes the subject of criticism at every juncture of life, in “Kasai” she is held responsible for the death of her child and in “Jaliyat” a mother’s responsibility in the upbringing of her children is questioned by society. 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 as a mother goes through in a society governed by patriarchal cultural norms. They tend to break the ideological definition of motherhood and bring out the human side of the woman trapped inside the mould of maternity with all her complexities and desires. The author does not judge but writes what she considers as truth, truth seen from the perspective of a woman, and in the process deconstructs the popular metaphor of the ‘divine mother’.

### “Chhinnamasta”

To Ashapura her characters are of utmost importance. In one of her interviews she states, “My prime concern has always been my characters, who I try to fit into the framework of events and then proceed.”(Dutta 271) Commenting on the characters of her stories Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her introduction to Ashapura Devi’s short story collection writes, “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.” (xvii) Her women are capable of subtle, complex and conflicting emotions. She again and again breaks the popular Hindu notion of the great mother and deglorifies her so that she can be free from the unrealistic demands of being a goddess. One such story is “Chhinnamasta” which depicts the mother son relationship where the power politics of domestic life revolve around holding 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 politics at whose centre is Bimalendu, Jayabati’s only son. Jayabati’s dream to welcome the new daughter-in-law to her household shatters as soon as she realizes that Pratibha is unlike a conventional shy newlywed woman who would listen to the instructions of her mother-in-law. Pratibha’s rude manners, ruthless complaints and growing control over Bimalendu turns 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) This is the same Jayabati who would lose herself into the happy imagination of her son’s marriage at one time. But Pratibha was nothing like the shy pretty obedient young girl of her imagination. Rather she 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 jealous as Bimalendu, her only son starts getting away from her, “She could bear anything but not the change in Bimalendu.” (166) Soon Jayabati’s rage turns to her son as well who now hardly speaks to his mother. The same Jayabati who was unable to bear the separation of her son for a single day takes a sigh of relief when Bimalendu returns to Kolkata after his marriage. Unable to bear the cruel remarks of her daughter-in-law about her widowhood at one point in the story she even wishes for the death of her son as she wanted to teach Pratibha a lesson and co-incidentally her wish fulfils for soon Bimalendu dies in a road accident. But was Jayabati mortified at the death of her only son, the son whom she loved so much? Did she regret her tragic wish? Perhaps it would have been so; the mother would have died crying and feeling guilty if the story had been written by someone else. But in Ashapura’s writing, at the end of the story we see Jayabati smiling cruelly as she ‘affectionately’ feeds Pratibha, now herself a widow.

“Chhinnamasta” shocks the reader as they find Jayabati, the once extremely loving mother, smiling cruelly at the death of her only son. Jayabati’s character breaks free the structured notion of maternity as her identity cannot be restricted to that of a mother only. The death of Bimalendu helps her with her revenge. It brings her victory in the domestic power play which she thought she was losing. Her lost control over the household ironically is regained by the death of Bimalendu, controlling whom Pratibha was able to make her feel inferior. Bimalendu here proves to be much more than a dear son. He was the main weapon in the hands of Jayabati’s cruel opponent, Pratibha. Jayabati appears as the castrating mother punishing not only her daughter-in-law but her own son as well for humiliating her and for taking away from her the authority she once exercised over the household and its members.

What seems more interesting is the title of the story, “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 and drinks her own blood. She is at the same time both the life giver and life taker, she 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 Hindu mother. In the character of Jayabati Ashapura boldly creates a figure who is rejoicing in her sacrifice but not for the benefit of the mankind but for her own successful personal revenge. But what is fascinating is that Jayabati, nowhere in the story, is portrayed as a villainous character; rather her unconscious wish for her son’s death comes as a natural reaction to her humiliations and perhaps we as readers also secretly cherish Jayabati’s victory. The moment we find Jayabati smiling is the moment of anxiety for the reader. It unsettles the reader by making him/her uncomfortable and by questioning their ability to accept the reality of female desires. Through the character of Jayabati Ashapura not only breaks the stereotype attached with the Hindu widow mother who depends entirely helplessly upon the male members of the family for survival, she also casts a counter female gaze to the patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

### “Bhoy”

While in “Chhinnamasta” Jayabati’s satisfaction on avenging her humiliation reveals the other sides of her character which is not limited to motherhood, Drabamoyee’s story depicts the mother’s earnest desire to stay alive even after the death of all her children. Ashapura gives a sarcastic picture of our society which does not believe that a mother has any life of her own beyond that of caring for her children. In “Bhoy” Ashapura introduces us to Drabamoyee, a

mother of several children. The story gives us a look into Drabamoyee's journey through motherhood and its different stages. We find her in the story playing solely the role of a mother from the tender age of eighteen when she lost her first infant 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 wants to die as she could not bear the death of her first born 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 most of the time through women who instead of empathising, creates odds for their own sex. 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 'excuse' of her three year old brother's death. Drabamoyee is the representative of the majority of Indian women whose worth in the household is determined by the number of sons they could reproduce. Her identity is limited to her motherhood and she is capable of exercising her authority and power as long as she could look after her children. In her middle age Drabamoyee is seen with her seven children as the authority of her household, she appears as a powerful authoritative figure dominating the course of her household and then suddenly life takes a turn. At the age of 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 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 sons and daughters. Her decline in age and power begins. Suddenly we find an old Drabamoyee, lost of her authority, productivity and power, a subject of mockery for all for outliving her children. The once

dominating and intimidating persona 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 capacity of leaving food and water to oath death? ...She even has lost the power of screaming the names of those who had left 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. At the final scene we see her skeptic about the treatment of the native doctor, ‘shamelessly’ 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 and ridiculed by all for her simple and rightful wish to stay alive. What catches out attention is that throughout the story Drabamoyee, the perpetual mother, is criticized sometimes for ‘overreacting’ on the loss of her first born 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 stopped mourning the death of her children and denies to die. Her identity, her behaviors are the subjects of scrutiny, and are constantly regulated by others. As a mother her subjectivity is continuously modified by the demands of a society where a woman’s identity is fixed in the roles of mothers and wives. Drabamoyee was criticized because in her desire for life she was a misfit for the traditional role of a self sacrificing mother. Her explicit desire for life was a threat to the extraordinary ideology of motherhood created by the society. In a Hindu household the wife gains “power” when she becomes a mother and that too of sons. Through Drabamoyee’s story Ashapura relates to the readers the tragedy of Indian motherhood. A mother is not expected to have the usual human desires. She is encircled by fixed roles and duties and is not allowed to

cross the periphery. A mother like the old Drabamoyee is an embarrassment to the society, an unnecessary liability and that's why she is told that she 'should' die, as if it is her duty to renounce her life once her children are not there. Drabamoyee's story somehow reminds us of Jashoda in Mahasweta Debi's "Stanadayini". Jashoda could exercise her authority, was valued by all as long as she could breastfeed the children of the zamindar family. More than once she has been compared by the other characters in the story to the cow and as the story moves towards its end we find her used like an animal. No sooner she lost the ability to breastfeed which was her 'use value', she was dethroned from the 'noble status' of a *Devi*. None of the children whom she breast fed or the members of the zamindar household she served for so long came forward to help her in her crisis. And when they came, it was only because they didn't want to bring bad luck upon the family by the death of a Brahmin woman in their home. Once again Mahasweta Debi shows us through her story the stark difference between myth and reality. The Jashoda of her story is the stark opposite of the mythological character, Krishna's foster mother, Jashoda. In "Stanadayini" the author shifts from myth to history and shows the insufficiency of mythology in an India where gender, class and various other factors bind women to a subordinate position. In Indian culture a woman's worth is evaluated on the basis of her being an obedient daughter to her father, a faithful and submissive wife to her husband and a sacrificing mother to her sons. The more sons a woman begets, the more she is praised. A mother of sons holds a superior position in the domestic hierarchy as well. Jashoda is raised to the status of 'divinity' by her strength of reproducing children and breastfeeding them. Like the story of Jashoda Drabamoyee's story too is the story and fate of Indian motherhood seen from a woman's perspective. It shows the tragedy, the false sense of pride that the ideology of motherhood in India carries. In this story Drabamoyee's 'use value' deteriorates with her age and she gradually

loses her status and worth inside the family. Like Jashoda, Drabamoyee too has no memory in the story of her own mother, of her own childhood. Her only memory is that of being a mother herself, of always carrying a child in her womb.

### **“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. But events become problematic when she unconsciously uses the memorial temple as a pretext to fulfill her own long repressed desire to have her own home. The story begins with the accident and the consequent news of death of Dibyakumar Sen, the only son of Sati Sen and Malabya Sen. Sati turns into a stone as 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 November, cannot be made to flow back in the tide of life anymore.” (Devi, *Swanirvachita* 213) She could not accept the fact that her beloved son is no more. She keeps hoping that her son is alive in some part of the world. But how long could one mourn? 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, soon she herself is found more excited about it. She plans to make a house with that money and there she will make the memorial temple of her son. With a childlike excitement she starts dreaming of the home, a home which she has desired for god knows how long. Finally her long suppressed dream is about to fulfill. She forgets her present tragedy and exclaims in joy “How I always longed for such a day!” (218) She plans the room where she would make the temple for her son, she would decorate it with a large photo framed in white where there would

hang a thick garland, the room would be full of the scented smell of incense sticks. She eagerly waits for the day when they would move into their new house. Coincidentally the day of the inauguration collided with her son's birthday and she imagines how her son would get a new life, would be born again in that memorial room. But does she really make the house to honor her son's memory? 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 alive. But does this make her happy? On the contrary she felt 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, now amputated, requesting them to rescue him and take him home.

Sati's character, as perplexing as it is to the reader, disrupts the age old concept of the Hindu mother. Her grief for her son fades away with time and soon we find her busy in fulfilling her own ambition of making a home with the compensatory money of her son's untimely death. She herself does not realize when she stopped mourning for Dibya and starts using his memory as a weapon to defend the long repressed dream of owning her own home. Her affections for her son are replaced by her artificial desire to immortalize his memory.

When the house is finally broken down Sati told Nirupam, you have to give us shelter at your place for some days *dada*. We are homeless now.

Saying it she started laughing like she did in the past.

Well, it does happen sometimes.

Does one remember all the time that I should not laugh now, laughing looks shameful?

(220)

Her metamorphosis is shown through her fluctuating emotions. She tries to hide her excitement of getting what she always wanted under the apparent grief for her son and therefore when she gets the news of her son being alive instead of being happy she feels as if her dreams are shattered. The second birth which she wanted for Dibya through the glamorous execution of her new home, showing it to all how much she loved her son, is annihilated with his letter, which should actually mark his second life. The son she lost, the charming young man full of possibilities of a bright future for himself and the parents and the amputated sick creature that wrote her the letter seem unlike to her. Like the character of Jayabati, Sati's character too shocks the reader and creates anxiety as one gets to witness the 'forbidden' aspects of a woman as a mother. Her character disturbs the conventional reader habituated with the orthodox gendered reading of the mother as a *Devi* and as the mother nation. Not only through sati's character as a mother but Ashapura also shows her defiance against conservatism by attributing Sati a mythical name.

### **“Jaliyat” and “Kasai”**

While Ashapura attempts to break the fixity attached to motherhood in Bengali, and at large Hindu society, she also questions the hypocrisy and double standards of society in another two stories selected in this chapter, “Jaliyat” and “Kasai.” In both the stories the author questions the demands of domesticity which tends to put all the burden of bringing up a child on its women. “Jaliyat”, which literally translates into fraud, portrays the struggles of a woman who



tries to maintain peace in her family by perpetually lying about the whereabouts of her children and finally one day her husband discloses that he knew about her lying and accuses her as the fraud. Santwana, a mother of three grown up children, lies often to her husband to keep peace in her household where there is a constant clash between the father and children. Shaktinath, her husband is perpetually nagging and hardly has any cordial relation with the children. As a result Santwana acts like a bridge between them and is often found manipulating the truth in order to prevent any direct confrontation between the father and children. Shaktinath has only one role in their lives and that is of shouting, dominating and accusing them. Depicting the position of Santwana the author describes, “She wanted to say that she could no longer weave the web of lies and manage the house. For how long she has been weaving it? Since the children have grown up. How many truths could she tell? To keep the hearts of the children and to keep Shaktinath’s temperament normal she often has to plough lies.” (Devi, *Bachhai Galpo* 251) She not only lies to her husband but her children as well, whom she could no longer control, in order to keep her dignity as a mother intact. This picture of the apparently ‘peaceful’ middle class household where the father is a distant member, an authority with scarcely any cordial bond with the children is not unfamiliar to us. Shaktinath’s distance with his children grows as he fails to understand them and tries to dominate their lives. The author compares him to an ‘aged tiger’ that does not have his strength but still roars in order to keep his false pride and authority secure. The children are more close to Santwana than to Shaktinath who does not engage himself much with them. At the end of the story when Santwana’s perpetual lying is disclosed after a phone call, which reveals that their son is arrested, Shaktinath mocks and accuses Santwana for being a fraud, who has been betraying him for so long. He also declares that he always knew the truth.

A similar but more painful picture of a husband questioning the maternal duties of his wife can be found in the story “Kasai”. The story shows the helplessness of a woman trapped in the politics of domestic life where it is the women of the house who are ruthless and unsympathetic to the plight of another woman. Kamala cannot attend her crying infant as she has her household duties to perform. She is mercilessly taunted by her in laws as she tries to attend her ailing infant son. Her husband, unable to pacify the child, angrily leaves him at the door of the kitchen, an act which ends in sarcastic comments from others. Finally after much drama when Kamala takes the child to the terrace to find relief from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house her husband comes back and snatches the child away from her. The doctor announces the child dead. Kamala is finally relieved from her duties and is alienated for ‘failing’ in her duties as a mother. Unable to bear the inhumanity any longer Kamala bursts into protest to her husband one day but all her protests and allegations turn into dust when her husband accuses her as selfish and calls her the *Kasai*, the butcher, who murdered their child on the pretext of performing household duties.

In both the stories there is allegation and counter allegation. Whereas in “Jaliyat” Santwana for the first time questions the role of Shaktinath, the father in the upbringing of their children, in sharing the responsibility of the family, in “Kasai” Kamala feels betrayed by her husband who accuses her as the butcher who killed their child. Kamala and her child became the victims of the covert politics of Bengali joint family structure. The stories depict the inevitable plight of maternity where the mother is held solely responsible for the well being of children and is questioned at every stage. If Santwana has been vainly trying to maintain peace by bridging the gap between father and children, Kamala became the victim of the enormous demands of being a wife and a mother in the joint family structure of middle class household.

In the five stories discussed in this chapter Ashapura familiarizes the readers with different aspects of motherhood and the negotiations a woman as a mother has to make in middle class families of Bengal. Although Jayabati's satisfaction on avenging her humiliation even at the cost of her son's death, the son who neglected the mother and favored the wife, shocks the reader, Jayabati is not portrayed as an evil character, rather she appears as a powerful threatening figure creating the anxiety of castration. In "Sthirchitra" we find a similar image where a mother plans to make a memorial with the compensatory money of her son's accident but as she finds out that her son is not dead but is alive and handicapped, instead of rejoicing she appears to grieve the fact that her plans for the memorial cannot succeed. In stories such as these Ashapura boldly and unhesitatingly nullifies the ideology of motherhood in popular tradition by sketching the characters as humans capable of the natural complexities of human emotions. They reflect the emotions that we often fear to acknowledge. Drabamoyee's story, on the other hand, reminds us of Jasoda in Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini". Jasoda was glorified and respected as long as she could breast feed the children of the zamindar family. Once her maternal function was over she was neglected and left by all. Drabamoyee, the once powerful matriarch of the household becomes the subject of contempt for all, mocked and criticized for outliving her sons. On the other hand Santwana and Kamala suffers the burden of motherhood within the family and were questioned and accused.

Whereas Ashapura depicts the plight of women as mothers, revealing the dark secrets of the 'happy middle class families' of Bengal, she also at the same time provides her characters with the agency to voice their protests, which may not be fruitful but are very much necessary. Her characters are not silent spectators and although they are not free from the prison of family and marriage the author continuously pushes them forward to protest against the injustices. She

breaks the connotations associated with the popular notion of motherhood by putting intriguing questions about the subjectivity and desires of the mother who before subscribing to any prescribed role is a human with all the contradictions, desires and complexities of human mind. Be it in “Chhinnamasta”, “Sthirchitra”, or in “Bhoy” Ashapura boldly rejects the so called glory attached to motherhood in Bengal by presenting the more human side of the woman where she ceases to be a politicized metaphor. Her mothers are not the stereotypical sentimental women that are common in popular Indian cinema and literature; rather they are the fruits of their socio economic conditions. They have multi dimensional personalities, and could be more related to the ground reality. The reason that Ashapura was able to create such different shades in her characters is because unlike popular mainstream literature she never tried to provide the reader with the ‘ideal’, rather as she herself mentioned in her non fictional works, she wrote what she witnessed and saw around her. Her characters are found in every household of the middle class families in Bengal. They do not represent the ‘ideal’, they represent the reality.

## Chapter II

### Love, Spite, and Deception: Mothers and Daughters

My mother's gifts of courage to me were both large and small. The latter are woven so subtly into the fabric of my psyche that I can hardly distinguish where she stops and I begin. – Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Mom*.

The first chapter of Ashapura Devi's magnum opus, *Pratham Pratishruti (First Promise)*, begins with Bakul telling the narrator, "Write my story later, if you must. Not now" (1) and the narrator explains, "Having travelled such a vast expanse of her life, Bakul has learnt that one must repay the debts to one's grandmother and great-grandmother before one begins to talk about herself." (2) Significantly enough the novel begins with the story of Satyabati, Bakul's grandmother and Satyabati's mother, Bakul's great grandmother. The history of mother-daughter bonding is like a chain, one unit is tied to another and thus it creates a unifying whole. Our relationship with our mothers, unlike with our fathers, has nothing to do with inheritance in terms of financial gain. Rather we inherit from our mothers the experience of being a woman. She leaves us with an oral world, the history of which had largely been ignored until the recent past. We share with her not only biological likeness but also the experiences that emanate from that body and together we create an unwritten history. Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jibon*, the first autobiography to be written by a Bengali woman, begins with a reminiscence of her mother and the brief period of her childhood which she spent with her. She remembers,

Afterwards, I went home and said to my mother, "Mother, If someone wants me will you give me away? My mother said, "Bless you! Whoever told you that I would give you away? Where did you hear all this? How can I give you away?" Saying this my mother

went into her room, wiping her tears. The moment I saw that my mother was crying, my soul flew away. Then I knew for certain that my mother would give me away to someone. Then it was that my heart broke into pieces. I thought, what has happened? Where will my mother put [send] me? (Banerjee 185)

In Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*, Bimala, the female protagonist begins her confession with nostalgia of her mother:

Mother, today there comes back to mind the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the Sari which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace. They came at the start of my life's journey, like the first streak of dawn, giving me golden provision to carry me on my way.

The sky which gives light is blue, and my mother's face was dark, but she had the radiance of holiness, and her beauty would put to shame all the vanity of the beautiful. (1)

Bimala, who tried hard to be a devoted woman like her mother, goes on narrating,

Everyone says that I resemble my mother. In my childhood I used to resent this. It made me angry with my mirror. I thought that it was God's unfairness which was wrapped round my limbs—that my dark features were not my due, but had come to me by some misunderstanding. All that remained for me to ask of my God in reparation was, that I might grow up to be a model of what woman should be, as one reads it in some epic poem.

When the proposal came for my marriage, an astrologer was sent, who consulted my palm and said, 'This girl has good signs. She will become an ideal wife.'

And all the woman who heard it said: 'No wonder, for she resembles her mother.' (1)

We follow our mothers like role models. She teaches us the 'rules' and 'manners' of society. She teaches us to be our 'feminine selves' so that we don't suffer in the real world when she would not be there. She teaches us what her own mother taught her. Our relationship with our mothers is not just biological but spiritual as well. Like sons, daughters do not need to separate themselves from their mothers on the ground of gender. To a mother a daughter is not a gendered other, rather she views her as the continuation of her own identity. Summarizing the theories of Nancy Chodorow regarding this mother-daughter relationship in this context Iris Young writes,

Because of her own gender identity, the mother identifies with her girl child more than with her boy child. In relating to her daughter she unconsciously replays many of the ambiguities and identifications she experiences with her own mother. The mother thus often tends to relate to her daughter more as an extension of herself than as a separate person...The mutually reinforcing identification of mother and daughter results in the girl's acquiring a sense of separate identity later than boys and never acquiring a sense of separation from others as strong as the boys. (Walters 150)

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. Unlike boy children they do not form an identity as opposed to the identity of their first 'object' of desire (mother). The identity of girl children thus is based on unity and continuity with the mother. However this identification with the mother often results in problems with

autonomy. Trapped in a socio-cultural scenario that is obsessed with patriarchal ideologies, the relationship of mothers with their daughters arouses several difficulties as the victimization of the mother finds its continuity in the daughter as well. As Adrienne Rich eloquently puts it,

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, whatever comes. A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her; it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. (Rich 243)

Suzanna Danuta Walter quotes Judith Arcana in this context in her work, *Lives together/Worlds Apart*, where Arcana warns, "The oppression of women has created a breach among us, especially between mothers and daughters. Women cannot respect their mothers in a society which degrades them; women cannot respect themselves." (145) Therefore in order to break free the age old victimized life of the mother, many feminist critics argue, it seems necessary to daughters to surpass the mother. However no matter how convenient this proposition seems, it at the same time has the danger of falling into the trap of neglecting the history of our mothers' struggle, the struggle of women. As Walter quotes Carol Dyhouse in her work,

But we should resist the temptation to present conflict and tension as wholly characteristic of mother-daughter relationships when the latter were at the adolescent age, nor should we stray into representing mothers as the main agents of their daughters' oppression. Certainly, mothers tended to provide their daughters with the latter's earliest models of "femininity". But one cannot assume that mothers themselves possessed simple unambiguous personalities wholly at ease with their social roles, nor that



daughters learned from their mothers passively, like blotting paper simply absorbing impressions. (Walter 156)

Ashapura Debi's works deal with different stages of womanhood and bonding amongst women. Among the various relationship that a woman goes through in her lifetime playing the socially pre-determined roles of mother, wife, sister and daughter in a society marked by patriarchal codes of socio-cultural norms, the relationship and bonding that a mother shares with her daughter emerges as the most important one. While her phenomenal work of fiction, the *Satyabati Trilogy*, explores intergenerational bonding of women, who belong and represent different periods of women's history and women's struggle to break free the chains of historical oppression, her short stories make a collage out of fragmented moments from everyday life. The twist with which her story ends jerks the reader's mind to make him/her pause and think of what just happened, to wonder at the beauty and complexities of life, to think how ordinary people have the capability to become extraordinary. Her created mothers, as I have discussed in the first chapter, are not what we expect them to be, rather with their individualities they stand firm and show us what we have never thought they could be. Their relation with their daughters is not simply of trainer and trainee. Through their daughters they seek their own freedom. This chapter discusses and explores the complexities of this homo-social relation that lie beneath the short stories, "Banchak", "Padatik", "Shok" and "Bibi Begamer Shibtala".

Prior to a discussion of the magnitude of mother-daughter bonding in her short fiction it is important to understand the author's own relation with her mother. More than once in her interviews and her non fictional works she had acknowledged the contribution of her mother in her life and in her career as a writer. Her anecdotes of her mother show the intimacy she shared with her and respect she felt for her mother. Giving the credit of her literacy and interest in

literature to her mother, Saral Sundari Devi, an avid reader herself, Ashapurna in one of her interviews recalled,

Whatever little Bengali I learnt to read and write was at home and due to my mother's initiative. My mother was very fond of reading books. She was a regular of literary books published by *Basumati*. The literary magazines like *Narayan*, *Bangadarshan*, came regularly to our house. 'Ma' was a member of three libraries. From childhood I used to read wolfishly all those books without anybody's knowledge—I was never choosy about books. While reading, I had a feeling that I may write as well. (Dutta 260)

Given the conservative atmosphere of her family, where she was not even permitted to attend school for education, had it not been for her mother, it would have not been possible for her to read and write. Saral Sundari's addiction of reading books found a way through her young daughter as well. In Ashapurna's stories the mothers strive hard to free their daughters from the bondage that has oppressed them. Sometimes they succeed, at the cost of their lives, as in "Bibi Begamer Shibtala" and sometimes they don't, as in "Banchak" but the struggle of becoming continues.

### **"Banchak"**

"Banchak" is the distressing story of a mother's relentless struggle to shower her only daughter with a few moments of happiness. As the story begins we find, avoiding two men who had come to inform her something urgent, Anindita Sen, as if intentionally, hurriedly moved into the taxi with her young married daughter, Ajanta Bose. They were going to attend the wedding of Ajanta's maternal cousin. But something did not feel right. As they arrived at the party it seemed that everyone was staring at the mother-daughter duo. Anindita was unusually talkative

and Ajanta could not understand why there was a question on everyone's face. It seemed as if the whole crowd was staring at them and whispering. Suddenly Ajanta was being treated differently by everyone. She was forbidden to participate in all the rituals into which she had been participating until that morning. Soon Anindita and Ajanta were told to go back home as a news of Ajanta's father's suddenly falling sick had arrived. They came out from the party but as soon as they reached their home they found Mr. Sen standing there, perfectly alright. He rudely ordered Ajanta to go inside and what followed next, the conversation and argument between Mr. and Mrs. Sen, shows Ashapura's empathetic observation of a mother's struggles. Anindita was charged by her husband for hiding the fact that Nishith, Ajanta's husband, died that day and enjoying the party as if nothing had happened. How could she be so pretentious and cruel as to hide such a serious and tragic information from her own daughter? Anindita's reply to her husband shocked the sarcastic Mr. Sen and the readers as well.

Yes I knew and yet hid the news. But can you say how much loss this world has suffered for that...All I thought was that my girl has been excited to enjoy Runu's marriage for the last six months, let her do so. The last enjoyment of her life, last ceremony...I thought I would steal only three hours from the ocean of time and nobody would notice. But that is not to be. (Devi, *Chhotogalpo Sankalan* 183)

Like Mr. Sen, the readers too were not ready for such a revelation. Anindita's reply unsettles the reader as well who cannot imagine that a mother can go to this extent to protect her daughter from the atrocious fate of being a widow. Her reply compels us to rethink the double standards of the society we live in. Anindita tried her best to protect her daughter and give her the last few happy hours of her life because being a woman she was well aware of the fact that widows have no worth in our society. As soon as the news of Ajanta being a widow spread the same people

who used to ‘love’ and ‘indulge’ her until that morning, started treating her like an untouchable. A woman’s worth in Indian society is validated by the presence of socially legitimate male members in her life. Anindita, being a mother, was aware of the life Ajanta was going to have once the information of her widowhood would become public. She strived to spare her daughter, therefore, few more hours of contentment, hours which were not victimized. The last scene in this story, as in many other stories of Ashapura Devi is important as once again there is a man and a woman confronting each other, accusing and counter accusing and thus interrogating the long standing socially accepted norms.

After staring for a minute at Anindita’s painted cheeks Sen exclaims in anger and sarcasm, I got your argument. But strange, how could you! She didn’t understand, but what about you? How could you then keep enjoying yourself in the party? (184)

And Anindita replied,

I thought that I could befool people. Foolishness! But are you asking about capability? What could a human not do? Even you could—even you could ask me for an explanation for stealing mere two hours from the eternal widowhood of your own daughter! (184)

The dramatic end of the story makes us rethink and reconsider our established notion of relationships and responsibilities. The story is very appropriately titled “Banchak”, which literally means “betrayer”. But who is the betrayer in the story? Is it Anindita, as Mr. Sen and apparently the readers find her to be, for hiding from all the knowledge of her daughter’s widowhood, or is it Mr.Sen, who as a husband and as a father, betrays both Anindita and Ajanta by asking for an explanation? Is it Anindita, as apparently seemed to Mr.Sen and readers, the betrayer who betrayed all by trying to protect her daughter from the atrocities of being a widow

or is it the father in a patriarchal social structure, who is completely unsympathetic to the miseries of his own daughter and is absolutely incapable of understanding her situation? As the story ends it makes us brood over the title.

### **“Shok”**

While “Banchak” and “Bibi Begamer Shibtala” depicts a mother’s compassionate relation with her daughter, “Shok” explores another aspect of this multi layered bond that is envy and conflict. The story is about Deepa and her brother, Joydeep, and the subtle gender relations that unconsciously dominate the psyche. Interestingly, although the story does not directly points to the mother-daughter relation yet there are certain sides of this relation which emerge out from the story. Deepa is the sole earning member of her household. After the untimely death of her father and the consequent illness of her mother Deepa had to take charge of her household at a young age. She plays the role of both father and mother to her younger siblings and is especially close to her younger brother, Joydeep. She even had to compromise her love life so that she can devoutly do the duties of a daughter and sister. Her brother, Joydeep, is unemployed and often asks for money from his sister with whom he shares a close bond. Their mother, although she is very briefly mentioned in the story for two to three times, is of special consideration in this discussion. To her mother Deepa is not the desired double, the continuation of her own self. She does not like the fact that her daughter has a superior role to play in the household. It also irritates her to see how Joydeep is always ‘begging’ to his sister for money. She constantly provokes Joydeep telling him to get a job so that they can get rid of Deepa’s superiority. On the other hand, Joydeep, who is almost like a grown up son to Deepa, is more close to his sister than his mother. While Deepa gets annoyed by Joydeep’s insensitive demands and taunts him for his vagabond lifestyle, she can never say no to him. Finally one day Joydeep comes to Deepa to give

her the news of his getting a good job. He tells Deepa that now she is 'free' from her responsibilities. The news would be delightful to the mother who always wanted to get rid of her daughter's superiority. But does this long desired freedom make Deepa happy? On the contrary Deepa finds it to be a humiliation.

While apparently the story does not directly focus on the mother daughter relation, a close reading of the story unravels to us certain interesting facts. Firstly, never for once in the story, Deepa is seen directly interacting with her mother. Secondly, Deepa plays the role of a substitute mother to her younger sibling in the absence of her mother's direct participation in the household matters. Thirdly, the conversation that her mother has with her son, Joydeep, is never heard by Deepa because the wall of Deepa's room separates her from the space her mother inhabits. In the story Deepa is never seen conversing with her mother. After her father's death, on account of her mother's dilapidating health, Deepa takes the responsibility of the household. She acts like a foster mother to her younger brothers and sisters. This change in responsibilities and power positions within the family negatively affects her own relation with her mother, who acts like a defeated authority, replaced by her daughter. Joydeep, Deepa's brother, is the only bridge between them. The setting inside the house where the characters are situated is also important in this context. Deepa is always found sitting in the small room of hers, busy in her works, and brooding over her life and what could have been. Her mother occupies the other side of the house, lonely and complaining. She even tries to provoke Joydeep against Deepa. Deepa's separation from her mother is marked by a concrete wall. Deepa never hears their conversation as there is a wall between them which separates Deepa's world from the world which her mother inhabits.

His mother replies in an agitated voice, 'Leave my afterlife! I'm here on the pity of my daughter, always terrified of her temperament--'...

These remarks do not reach Deepa's ears, this side there are only walls. (Devi, *Chhotogalpo Sankalan* 53)

These walls might be the walls of mind which she has erected to separate herself from her complaining agitated mother. To her mother Deepa is a rival to her position in the household. Joydeep, the brother next to Deepa in age, seems to be closer to his sister than his mother. This intimate relation between Deepa and her brother agitates the mother who feels threatened by her daughter's growing superiority in the household.

Joydeep's mother could not even think of scolding him since he has grown up, Joydeep's father's temperament never let him talk even in a loud tone to the children. His elder sister is the only ruler.

..... Yet that absent minded, rebel boy never utters a word in front of her. To his sister he is more like a grown up little boy. (50)

"Shok" reminds us of a similar complex relationship between mother and daughter that can be found in Manju Kapoor's popular novel, *Difficult Daughters*, where Vasumati, the daughter and Kasturi, the mother share a problematic relationship. Being the eldest of all children, Vasumati, during the perpetual pregnancy of her mother, takes the responsibility of her household. Kasturi has to yield her position to Vasumati quite unwillingly and this in turn threatens her own position in the household as the mother. Vasumati becomes the substitute for Kasturi and not the desired double and thus she appears as a rival to her mother constantly challenging her authority. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, "She (mother) cannot bear to have her

double become the other.” (Shukla 92) In Deepa’s case, her position in the household is more problematic than Vasumati because in providing and caring for the family she has not only replaced her mother but her father as well, which her patriarchal mother cannot tolerate. Therefore, she constantly provokes Joydeep against Deepa. The story points how patriarchal norms and values regulate our minds. To mothers, daughters are the identical doubles while sons replace the position of the father. After the father the son is supposed to become the ‘authority’ in the household while the female members would occupy subordinate positions. Deepa’s superior position in the household troubles her mother. She feels subordinated to her daughter and therefore desires her to be removed from her authoritative position by the son, which being a patriarchal woman is more acceptable to her. Deepa and her mother’s relation lack the empathy and understanding which we find in the mother-daughter bonding in stories like “Banchak” and “Bibi Begumer Shibtala”. It is the cunning of patriarchy that it turns a mother against a daughter, a woman against a woman. It regulates the woman’s body and psyche in such a way that she not only consents to the gendered hegemony unaware of its lying dangers but also drags down her own sex in the process.

### **“Padatik”**

“Padatik” literally translates into foot soldiers who are numerous in number in a war but whose individual contribution is never counted. The story revolves around Jayanti and her growing dislike towards her own mother. The story begins with Jayanti, a working girl, being annoyed by the perpetual complaints of her mother. Sabitri, Jayanti’s mother, is found always cursing herself and persistently praying for her own death. The author narrates Jayanti’s feelings towards her mother,



It feels disgusting to Jayanti, intolerable.

She doesn't even feel like calling her mother 'ma' anymore. Except the two times' meal and shelter at night all her association with her home is gradually disappearing. Jayanti is removing it willingly by withdrawing even the tea and breakfast session.

.... Does Sabitri have this much irritation to maintain a mere household, to arrange food for a few people? This much incapability! What would she have done if she had to earn money to get food! (Devi, *Galposamagra* 146)

Narrating the secret thoughts of a self-pitying Jayanti, annoyed by her mother's insensitive behaviour towards the family members, the narrator writes, "What hard work Jayanti has to do! Does anyone ever think about it? Leave alone the soft feelings of maternity; could Sabitri not understand her at least for the sake of average humanity?" (147) Jayanti's unattachment and indifference towards her family gradually increases, the main reason of this being her mother, "Somehow now a days a cruel anger is gathering in Jayanti's mind. Not against God, but against her own mother!" (147) She criticises her mother secretly for the way she runs the household and behaves with her young children. Finally unable to handle the perpetual complaints and naggings of her mother she goes to inform her father that she has decided to forsake the house. While her father tries to pacify her by sympathising with Sabitri's situation, Jayanti utters in a hurt voice, "To boil some rice for the household is not the greatest hard work father, who is having food here without working for it? But there should be a limit to bad temperament. She is not really insane after all!" (149)

A minute analysis of the characters reveals that Jayanti's detest to her mother results from her identifying herself with her father and denying the mother; and while her father is more

understanding and sympathetic towards his wife, Jayanti, being a woman herself, seems to be just the opposite. Jayanti's loathing towards her mother stems from a sense of superiority. She has a job that gives her monetary benefits, while in her view her mother is a 'mere housewife'. She could not understand why her mother always complains 'sitting at home' while it is she and her father have to work hard to 'earn' for the family. Born and brought up in a male dominated world, Jayanti eventually adapts to the androcentric ways of life where housework and care labour is taken to be natural to women and is hardly considered as work. She is not only unsympathetic but quite cruel, at times, to her mother. Living in a patriarchal world with male centric values in mind she is unable to comprehend the struggles of her mother. She, in spite of her biological likeness to Sabitri, proves to be her gendered other. But the story soon takes a turn and Jayanti's conscience is struck with guilt when Sabitri unexpectedly suffers a stroke.

Today Jayanti didn't remember that she has a job.

As if Jayanti has woke up from slumber...Oh! Today she has to look after all these!

But the poor girl was stupefied as she entered the kitchen!

.....

It is clear that Sabitri could not clean all these last night...Every day after everyone falls asleep, Sabitri's work for the next day begins...Washing the dishes and the floor, cleaning the yard, breaking coals, cutting vegetables and grinding spices as silently as possible...In as much low light as possible so that nobody's sleep gets disturbed...so that the kerosene is not wasted.

Has Jayanti ever noticed when her mother goes to sleep? (151-152)

Jayanti starts understanding her mother's agony once she shares the same domestic position that her mother had. After her mother gets bedridden Jayanti has to play her role and do the same 'mere domestic works' for which she criticised Sabitri vehemently. She begins to identify with her mother once she replaces her and being on the same platform she now starts empathising with Sabitri.

Sabitri is lying there with a cold face, as if all her ties with the household have already wrecked before death.

Are Jayanti's eyes getting teary because she is angry with her mother?

Sabitri had been running the home in this way with her lean skeleton body....day after day, night after night!.. But why, they never had to spend the night eating breads!...Even then Minu never had to carry water from the tube well.

When was Bijoy babu seen crouching on the floor fanning?

Had Jayanti even decorated a *paan* ever since she got the job?

Is the weight of seventy rupees really so heavy? Or is the money so dazzling that it blinded Jayanti! (153-154)

At one point in the story before Sabitri's illness, we find Jayanti trying to prepare a speech for her office's meeting on the discrimination between the Capitalist owner and working class labourers. She compares the workers with the foot soldiers, who are numerous in number in a war, but whose contribution is never mentioned in history. As the story proceeds towards an end we find Jayanti gaining a new perspective. She ponders over the true meaning of *Padatik* (foot-soldiers). Who are the *Padatiks* in our daily life? Aren't they wives and mothers like Sabitri who

work from day to night without asking for anything? Our society doesn't even acknowledge their toil as 'work' as it does not fetch direct financial gains. After spending a single day of her mother's daily life Jayanti realises her mistake. She starts identifying with her mother's position and acknowledges her labour. It dawns upon Jayanti as well as the readers that we should start reconsidering our normative understanding of truth and reality.

### **“Bibi Begamer Shibtala”**

Of all the four stories discussed in this chapter “Bibi Begamer Shibtala” is unique in the sense that while none of the other three stories have any clear mention of time and space this story specifically is set during the British era in Halishahar, a small town in Bengal. The story employs the technique of flashback, where the narrator is telling the story of a bygone time. Although set in different time periods both the stories “Banchak” and “Bibi Begamer Shibtala” are similar in the sense that they explore a similar bond between mother and daughter. The narrator of the story is a young student of history who visits Murshidabad to explore the history of that place but what interests him most is the mysterious untold history of a temple called ‘Bibi Begamer Shibtala’. The religious oxymoron in the temple's name and the dilapidated condition of the temple arouses his curiosity. What strikes us the most in the first few paragraphs is the lost history of women. When the narrator asks his aunt, who is originally a resident of Murshidabad, about the temple, she seemed more interested in the history of the nawabs. Gradually it is revealed that the temple is made by the Hindu wife of a Muslim nawab. The temple now stands desolated with hardly anyone visiting it. The narrator seeks to imagine the Begum's position and makes an endeavour to rewrite her life and history lost in oral tales. Thus “Bibi Begamer Shibtala” is a story within a story.

The narrator's imagination which is founded on scattered facts takes us to a middle class household in Halishahar during the British raj where there lives a young girl, Giribala who is a widow. The story is the description of one important day in Giribala's life which would change the course of her life. Giribala, who became widow at quite an early age, is seen by the readers fasting along with her two widow aunts, Mangala and Rammoni. Giribala, the fifteen year old widow, finds it difficult to keep the *nirjala* fast which means she cannot even drink water. The author writes,

A healthy fifteen year old girl, in her body there is the tumult of upcoming tide

But a single day's Nirjala fast turns her into a stick.

Strange!

Her aunt Mangala and younger aunt Rammoni have also been keeping fasts since they were ten years old. When have they been like Giribal? Rather they keep all the surplus work of the household for *Ekadoshi* itself. They have ample time that day...

Giribala cannot do all those things. (Devi, *Galposamagro* 52-53)

Giribala sits by the window and stares at the river Ganga. She longs for a day when she will also be able to travel in a boat and find her freedom. On the other hand, Giribala's mother feels anxious and tortured seeing her only daughter being subjected to such cruelty. Her patience finally breaks when Rammoni announces that they have to keep a two day long fast. Unable to bear the tortures inflicted on her daughter any longer, Giribala's mother pleads to her husband to do something, otherwise she would have to take some action. The difference between the father's and the mother's affection to the daughter is noticeable here. While her father remains entirely

unmoved by the sorrows of his daughter and dictates that Giribala must follow the instructions given to her, Giribala's mother does what many could not imagine. She plans her daughter's escape from the claustrophobic rigid customs of Brahmin household. Desperate to save her daughter, Giribala's mother, without Giri's knowledge, plans to send her to the boat of the young nawab and she herself commits suicide. In the morning, her dead body is found in the Ganga, clutching a white cloth in her hand. It was the same *saree* she asked Giri to take with her. Nobody knew her secret and everybody thought that both Giribala and her mother were drowned in the river while bathing. They thought that the *saree* in her hand belonged to Giribala who is drowned and lost in the river. Giri's mother made sure that nobody comes to know the truth even after her death.

Both the stories "Banchak" and "Bibi Begamer Shibtala" show a mother's desperate struggle to shield her daughter from the inhuman treatment of society. Although the time and setting of the stories are drastically different, very little has altered in the position of widows in our society. What happened to Giribala after that we never get to know but we could well guess that she is the Bibi Begum who established the temple. The deserted temple is the concrete proof of the lost history of Giribala and many others like her whose history is lost because a woman's history was never deemed important enough to be written down. There are numerous mothers who had to sacrifice their lives to save their daughters and there are numerous daughters who are lost in the history of men. The story is important since it deals with many undisbursed issues of female experience. Along with a discussion of the unwritten history of women's lives and issues of widowhood, the story also fascinates us with its exploration of the mother-daughter bonding. As the story ends the conversation between the narrator and his aunt compels us to think what the society has done to its women,

I had put down the pen--

My aunt from Lalbagh asked with surprise—"Oh, see what you have done!.....who told you all these?

I solemnly replied, the spirit of Giribala

.....the spirit of Giribala had been sighing sitting near 'Bibi Begumer Shibtala'. (58)

In all of the stories discussed above Ashapura shows the problematics of the mother daughter bonding and the multi layered aspects of this relation. No relationship can be put into a single fixed structure. Her understanding of the plurality of this bond is therefore multi dimensional. Within the large range of her short stories in each story the relationship gets a different vision, and is understood through a different perspective. Ajanta's relation with her mother is not the same that Jayanti shares with Sabitri or that which Deepa shares with her mother in "Shok". Ashapura touches on every psychological aspect of this bonding portraying it through love and hatred towards the mother. The master narrative of literature in Bengal and at large in India hardly deals with the mother-daughter bonding. Even in films and other media productions it is the mother-son relation that dominates the scene. Radhika Mohanram in her essay "The Problems of Reading: Mother Daughter Relationships and Indian Postcoloniality" writes, "The most significant difficulty is not interpretation of texts but location of materials. Stories of mother-son and father-daughter relationships abound in Indian mythic as well as modern literature, but there is a curious silence on the thematic of mother daughter relationships." (20) This extraordinary focus on hetero-social relationships has become the norm in Indian literature and culture. Ashapura's stories look beyond such norms and try to put meanings into the long neglected world of women. In her world inhabited by women, the

daughters continually engage in a deconstructing process while understanding their equation with their mothers. While they struggle to come to terms with the identical self, they cannot deny the experiences that the mother goes through and that she as a woman has to undergo herself. In India it is difficult to interpret such relation, especially when it concerns the mother, because there has been a tendency to associate the mother with the mother nation. The impact of colonialism was such that any discourse on the mother must include the mother-son narrative. In such a scenario standing in the twentieth century Ashapura strictly denies to conform to this tradition of visualising the mother solely as the maternal figure of the country, which lets her short stories include the possibility of diverse interpretations.



## Chapter III

### Matchbox: The Troubled Wedlock

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence. – The Laws of Manu V: 148

To Manu, the fabled creator of laws for Hindu society, women were 'false, a misfortune, mere passion like wine or chess'. The creator of laws also dictated, "A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is an object of reproach in this world; (then) she is reborn in the womb of a jackal and is tormented by the diseases born of her evil." (The Laws of Manu V:164). Hindu society, which felt proud of its blind obedience to the 'sacred' instructions of the *Shastras*, had been distinctly rigid in case of its women. Women in India must fit into the ideal of motherhood and wifehood, the two 'major' aspects of womanhood. If a woman fails to prove herself to be a good mother and obedient wife, she is considered to be a fallen woman. She must be Jashoda in her maternity and Sati in her duties towards the husband. The fate of Hindu women was decided until the nineteenth century when there was noticed a sudden consciousness regarding the subjectivity and position of women within Hindu society, especially the domestic sphere. These 'benevolent' concerns regarding women's education and upliftment had their own political considerations. Social reform in the nineteenth century ran hand in hand with demands of political reform. Desperate to carve a national identity for their own, the Hindu men started revising their past to revive their 'lost glory', the glory of being *Kshatriya*. In this tumult of rediscovering and redefining the nation's past, the women's question came up as an important issue.

Criticised severely for their effeminate nature and barbaric culture, Hindu natives of India tried hard to gain back their honour and women's question became the main reviving point in this case. Apart from glorifying the Hindu motherhood, an 'ideal' of wifhood was also formed. For the politically deprived Indian the family became the only site where he can claim his authority and find compensation for his lost political honour. To them it was the only independent, unconquered space, where they can claim their unquestioned authority. Gradually the domestic space became the site of contestation and public debate. According to Tanika Sarkar, "Unlike Victorian middle class situations the family was not a refuge after work for the colonized men-- it was the real place of work."(Bagchi 100) Inside the household the woman's body was regulated and disciplined to emphasise the 'sacred' nature of Hindu community as opposed to the materiality of the West. An ideal of Hindu wifhood was formed. Women were asked to become the *Sahadharmini* of their male partners, to be his 'equal' in his fight for political freedom. Women, who were praised until the recent past for their western style of domesticity by elite Hindus, were now being criticised for the same. The popular *Tatvabodhini Patrika* criticised women for their Western habits of leisure and lack of attention to domestic works. The real purpose behind their education was to turn them into 'ideal' mother, wife and homemaker. Swami Vivekananda, the protagonist of *Brahmacharya* during Indian nationalist movement, instructed in one of his works,

The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita. Sita is unique. She is the very type of the true Indian woman. ... Any attempt to modernise our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure as we see every day. (300)

This idea of Indian wifehood is still prevalent and dominates the psyche of the mass. A woman is expected to be obedient and sacrificing as a wife. She is taught by her parents to stay silent in her in-laws' home, to adjust. A woman out of wedlock is still not easily accepted by our society. She is always instructed to have a male by her side to validate her identity and social reputation. As Ashapura's stories are set in the domestic platform, women emerge as key characters. Portrayed in the roles of mothers and wives, Ashapura's characters often defy the pro-masculinised version of women, popularised by the master narrative of contemporary times. While commenting on the representation of women in Ashapura's works feminist critics Lalita and Tharu allege that in Ashapura's world freedom is like an "escapist dream" They regard the popular dismissal of Ashapura as the consequence of the "conservative posture" of her narratives. I would like to argue here against this oversimplified interpretation of Ashapura's works. In one of her interviews 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)

Perhaps it is this 'camouflaged' nature of the writer which many critics have failed to detect. Ashapura is an honest painter of everyday lives of men and women, therefore she records everything she witnesses around her as a woman. She asserts, "I witnessed the endless sufferings of women in my childhood, the disadvantage of being a woman; and the conflicts that I suffered within my mind intrigued me all the time. Other than that, there was a suppressed pain against conservatism" (Chatterjee 263) Her protests against the conservatism of society is subtly expressed in her works. Her women characters cannot be made to fit into a singular mould.

Neither do they always surrender, nor do they always get success with their rebellion. An author writes the truth from his/her own perspective and social position. Ashapura writes what she witnesses in real life without exaggerating it and even when her characters are surrendering to norms, it is important to observe the nature of the surrender. Do they surrender because they have accepted their subjugation or are unaware of it? Or is the surrender claustrophobic? Or is it a political stance by the author to show the real picture of a society which has imbibed the values of patriarchy in its women so deep that they are afraid of alienation? To find the answers to this question I have selected five stories to discuss in this chapter, namely “Deshlai Baksho”, “Ja Noy Tai”, “Sambhram”, “Behaya” and “Taser Ghor”, which highlight the diverse fragmented feminine in Ashapura’s short stories.

### **“Deshlai Baksho” and “Ja Noy Tai”**

Ashapura begins the story, “Deshlai Baksho” (Matchbox), with the potent remark, “I always compare women to matchboxes. Why? Because of the way matchboxes are—even though they have enough gunpowder to set a hundred Lankas aflame, they sit around meek and innocent, in the kitchen, in the pantry, in the bedroom, here, there, anywhere- women, too, are exactly the same!”(Devi, *Matchbox* 102) The story’s offset provides us a clue to the author’s chosen subject matter for this story. She, clarifying her opinion about the female sex, professes that they are not incapable of understanding and resisting gendered discrimination but they are in want of the confidence and the realization of their self esteem to do so. The story revolves around the couple Ajit and Namita. As the story unravels we know the complex relation that Namita shares with her husband. The story surrounds an incident from their daily life as an example pointing to the author’s argument. Married off into a family financially superior to her, Namita is caught between the tension of meeting the demands of her widow mother and the

consequential incessant taunts of her husband. Her privacy is repeatedly disrupted as Ajit never hands her a single letter without first reading it himself. As the story unfolds we find Namita discovering a letter of her mother from Ajit's pocket. The envelope was torn implying that it was already read by her husband. The letter contains nothing but a message from her mother asking for one more favour from her 'queenly' daughter and her 'generous' husband. Her mother's unstoppable demands cause her incessant humiliation by Ajit who is anything but generous to his mother-in-law. No longer able to control her anger and disgust Namita charges Ajit with an explanation for encroaching upon her private space by reading her letters. Ajit's reply shows the sense of ownership that a man believes he has over his wife, "Ajit tries to scatter this charge to the winds, 'What if I opened it? My own wife's letter--'.... 'If you are forbidding it then there's definitely something. Shouldn't I make sure that no one's passing you love letters in secret?'" (105) Their argument reaches its height as Ajit keeps taunting her. Unable to restrain her anger, in the fleet of a moment Namita takes the matchbox from the table and throws a burning stick on her sari. Ajit was unnerved and was taken aback by such an unexpected reaction. The next scenes show Namita getting back to her normal daily life, being teased by her sisters-in-law of her 'romantic married life', and herself participating in their jokes while anxious inside, contemplating ways to send her mother some money in order to preserve the 'generous' image of her husband.

The humiliation that Namita is subjected to in her conjugal life is not uncommon in society. Financially subjugated, it is the homogenous experience of most women in their married lives where they are subjected to continuous humiliation by their husbands and others. This attitude of abasement is a plotted strategy to diminish the self confidence of women and make them believe into the age old well crafted lie that women cannot survive without men. Women in

marriage are seen as commodity, the ownership of which belongs to their husbands. In middle class families of India, even till now, women are often deprived of economic independence. Besides belittling the labour of housekeeping, women are often denied the right to go out to earn money. But the tragedy lies in the fact that women are often aware of it yet they are unable to protest. Ashapura's characters are not blind to this discrimination but imprisoned in a patriarchal world they often lack the boldness to run a prolonged resistance. This unwilling surrender to patriarchal hegemony is the theme of the story "Ja Noy Tai" as well. Jealousy, insecurity and possessiveness of the husband which leads the wife to painful humiliation and subjugation are the themes of this story. Shripati is possessive of his wife to such an extent that he does not allow anyone inside his home, not even her relatives. His sense of possession over his wife leads him to suspect anyone who talks to her, so much so that he even neglects his important engagements to keep an eye on Gayatri.

Gayatri feels angry, humiliated and even sad at times....

From Gayatri's parents' side except for her father and brother everyone's entry is strictly prohibited in her home, although not in written terms, but in unwritten rule. After her marriage many would come to visit her, but now they hardly come. They have stopped coming—after getting silent notice of humiliation on Shripatis face. (Devi, *Swanirvachita* 39-40)

Through one specific incident Ashapura attempts to disclose the truth of her claustrophobic marriage. Gayatri is invited to sing for an event organised by the boys of the local club. As they affectionately force Gayatri to come with them and she tries her best to refuse them, her fear and anxiety makes the readers anxious as well. As the nervous Gayatri returns to her home in the

evening Shripati waits outside to confront and interrogate her for her 'shameful crime'. Unable to bear the humiliation further, a mortified Gayatri does protest but her feeble protest is lost in front of her husband's unbridled dominance over her. Shripati's offending remarks stupefies her. Narrating to the readers Shripati's reply to Gayatri Ashapura writes,

'My husband does not like all these'—those women who feel ashamed to say this, Shripati knows well how good their character is. The only weapon to teach them a lesson is his shoes! This is Shripatis last decision!

After such a reply Gayatri was not in a position to talk. (45)

Gayatri's momentary contemplation of suicide as a way of escaping the suffocation of her marriage mortifies the reader as well. Her humiliation creates a full circle when the next day she again has to get back to her regular life, serving her husband, taking care of the household duties. When the boys came again to take her she could not refuse them. Perhaps she would not be allowed to enter the house anymore, perhaps Shripati would really hit her with shoes, but Gayatri goes with them. But this apparent act of defiance by her is not resistance, rather it is her hard struggle to protect the public image of her 'happily married life'. As the story ends the author narrates,

She could rather bear being hit by Shripati, but she cannot make herself inferior to people....

What can she do apart from it? Does she have any other way out?

Should she protest?

Has she gone mad! Gayatri is not stupid. How could she rise in the social ladder if she make people laugh by insulting her own husband?

People do not respect but pity the women, who cannot control their husbands. (47)

Therefore in order preserve the ‘sanctity’ of her shallow marriage and to keep her dignity inviolate Gayatri succumbs to accepting her life the way it is. There is a point in the story when Gayatri’s maid servant assures her that in the *bhadra* families it is not the tradition to hit wives. Ashapura attempts to break this myth through this story. She negates the image of the middle class *bhadralok* and the *bhadra* family by narrating the void.

Both the stories, “Deshlai Baksho” and “Ja Noy Tai”, narrate the consensual subjugation of woman within marriage and domesticity. In Ashapura’s short stories and in her novels as well the female protagonists are not entirely unaware of their subjugation. Rather their subjugation is marked by their forced willful surrender to patriarchal norms. But Ashapura’s narration of this ‘surrender’ speaks a lot about the author’s understanding and political stand. Besides being unwilling, their surrender creates an atmosphere of suffocation within the narrative. Such is the mastery of Ashapura over the use of colloquial regional dialect that the readers become a part, in the experience of being suffocated, with the female characters which induces in them an empathetic understanding of the women’s position in marriage and family. Time and again Ashapura tries to show how it is the lack of confidence and an imposed sense of low self esteem that keep women bound to an oppressed condition. It is the fear of rejection by society that works behind this consent to domination. In both “Deshali Baksho” and “Ja Noy Tai”, the female protagonists are entirely conscious of their subjugation. Like characters in mainstream narratives they do not consider their subjugated position as natural and beyond



question but the fear of being ostracized forces them to maintain a false sense of dignity and prevents them from exercising their agency to protest against discrimination. Namita and Gayatri's victimization is also a result of their conjectured fear of what lies beyond marriage. The uncertainties and struggles of establishing themselves once out of the wedlock hinder their way to freedom. The women's consensual surrender boosts the fragile power of their husbands. Both Ajit and Shripati are found being nervous and afraid whenever their wives burst out in protest but the temporality of the protests encourages their sense of authority. Therefore Ashapura compares women to matchsticks which have enough fire and possibilities but they do not realise their worth and let men rule them. As Ashapura poignantly puts it at the end of the story ,

This—this is precisely why I compare women to the matchboxes. Even when they have the means within themselves to set off many raging fires, they never flare up and burn away the mask of men's high-mindedness, their large-heartedness....

They won't burn them—and the men know this too.

That's why they leave them scattered so carelessly in the kitchen, in the pantry, in the bedroom, here, there, anywhere.

And quite without fear, they put them in their pockets. (108)

### **“Sambhram”**

“Sambhram” is another powerful reminder of women's domestic subordination as a result of enforced economic dependency upon men and the shallow pride that masculinity carries in a society marked by gender binary. The story begins with Bhupati taunting his wife, Kanak, for

sending a letter to her brother, Sunil, asking for a job for her unemployed husband. Bhupati's sudden loss of his job throws the family in utter penury. The situation degrades to such an extent that they can hardly afford daily food for their children. But even in such dire poverty Bhupati strictly adheres to his male ego. He remains stubborn in his decision of not taking any help from Kanak's brother as it is beneath his honour to work under his brother-in-law. Kanak at last loses her patience when her children are removed from school by the school authority as they cannot afford to pay the fee. She finally gathers the courage to request Sunil for a job expecting that trapped in such a situation Bhupati would agree to take the job now. But dismissing all her trust and expectations her husband refuses to take her help. Bhupati's constant denial marks his insecurity regarding his authoritative position in the family. In no way he is ready to risk it by accepting his wife's help in bringing financial stability in the household.

At one point in the story Ashapura writing about the passing thoughts of Kanak exclaims, "What a helpless imprisoned life it is!" Encaged within her marriage the plastic red and white bangles, the 'sacred' symbols of matrimony, felt like handcuffs to her. Unable to bear the pain Kanak bursts out in protest. Ashapura narrates,

But Kanak will not let him go.

She will finish this matter today.

Every moment is poisonous to her....Even Bhupati's face seems poisonous. Yes, absolutely! ...she burns with rage every time she looks at Bhupati. (Devi, *Swanirvachita* 56)

On the other hand, Bhupati's shallow pride leads him to such an extent that even the hunger stricken faces of his children stops bothering him. Insensitive to the troubles of his wife and

children Bhupati selfishly clings on to his stubbornness. Being a middle class housewife, Kanak is not allowed to earn as it would hurt the insecure self esteem of her husband as well. Trapped in her marriage with the burden to preserve the social status, Kanak suffers in shame. While her husband remains unmoved she is ashamed to face her children to whom she constantly lies. Unable to bear the domestic tension she taunts her husband,

Kanak starts screaming in a voice as bitter as she can make it, will you beg? Even that would keep your masculinity intact, right? Why, all the humiliation is in working in *dada's* office? (57)

In spite of the bitter conjugality Kanak does not in reality attempt to come out of it. Her protests remain mostly verbal. On the contrary, as the story approaches its end, we find Kanak trying hard to hide from her brother all the signs of her suffering. She pretends to her brother to hide the fact that Bhupati does not want to work under him even if they die starving. Like Namita in “Deshlai Baksho”, Kanak too surrenders to her claustrophobic conjugal relation, trying to maintain the ‘dignity’ of her husband and her marriage.

“Sambhram” is similar to Ashapura’s another story “Brahmastra”( Brahma’s weapon) in its subject matter. But while in “Sambhram” Kanak succumbs to the adverse situations in her marriage, in “Brahmastra” the protagonist, Asima, exercises agency to resist her husband’s intentionally inflicted humiliations. In “Brahmastra” we find another face of dominance. Unlike Bhupati, who did not like the idea of Kanak helping him, Ranabir, Asima’s husband, continually pressurises her to meet her former lover, Debabrata, who is now an well established businessman and beg for a job for her husband. While to Bhupati it was humiliating to take his wife’s assistance in financial matters, Ranabir’s demands from Asima to help him by meeting

Debabrata is a selfish strategy to embalm his jealous insecure self by throwing her into an uncomfortable situation and demeaning her. His insecurity as a husband leads him to force Asima to visit Debabrata to ask for a job which he does not in reality intend to do at all. Debabrata's superior social and financial position makes him feel inferior to Asima and to heal this wound he plans to derive sadistic pleasure by putting his wife in an awkward situation and belittling her in front of others. But unlike Kanak, Asima does not fall a prey to male treachery, rather she subverts the situation to avenge insults inflicted upon her. While an eager Ranabir waits for Asima to learn from her own mouth the saga of her humiliation, she tells him that she indeed pleaded for a job and she has got one but not for Ranabir, for herself. Her reply baffles her husband who thought he could satisfy his insecure instincts by humiliating his wife. "Sambhram"'s Kanak and "Brahmastra"'s Asima represent different forms of domination, and while Kanak finds it difficult to protest, Asima's agency is more prominent.

The title of the story once again like most other stories of Ashapura Devi compels us to rethink the true meaning of *Sambhram* or dignity. It disrupts our normative understanding of the term. To Bhupati it would be a disruptor of his masculine dignity to take any help whatsoever from his wife's brother because in his mind it would make him feel inferior to his wife. Working under his brother-in-law is dishonourable to him as he wants to maintain his fake masculine pride. Kanak, on the other hand, tries her best to maintain her dignity in front of her brother by spending the one rupee, perhaps her last support, to hide her poverty, to hide her shallow relationship with her husband. What could be the possible definition of dignity then? Ashapura makes us question our understanding. Imprisoned in a gendered world, dignity has different meanings to both men and women. Was it dignified of Bhupati, obsessed with his male ego, to reject the only hope of changing their situation or was it dignified on the part of Kanak to stay in

a marriage where there is no mutual respect? The story leaves us with questions and makes us reconsider the normative values that run our lives.

### **“Taaser Ghor” and “Behaya”**

While stories like “Deshlai Baksho” and “Sambhram” discuss the unhappy unwilling surrender of women, “Taaser Ghor” is the narrative of a woman walking out of her marriage when she finds out that there is no respect left for her in the family. The protagonist of this story is Mamata, whose happy abode suddenly is ruined by a little misunderstanding. A loving and caring wife, Mamata, when realizes that the home she has built with her pure untainted love was never strong enough to trust her, she leaves it. The misunderstanding starts when Mamata’s maternal cousin comes to visit her one night and Tarangini, her sister in law, not knowing who it was starts conjecturing about the identity of the man. Before she could tell anyone about her brother’s arrival Mamata was called to attend her younger sister who was about to deliver a child. In her absence the rumour regarding Mamata’s disloyalty to her husband and family was spread. Her mother-in-law, who always favoured her, started suspecting her character. By the time she reached home it was a well established fact in everyone’s minds that Mamata’s character and loyalty as wife are not trustworthy.

Therefore her qualities were known to all. Throughout the day on the absence of the prime suspect a storm of discussion blew in the house. And except Bijoli almost everyone, although found it painful, did not hesitate to believe that the nature and character of *boro bou* are doubtful...

The respect, devotion and honour that Mamata gained through her hard labour for the last eighteen years were all lost for a moment’s inconsideration. (Devi, *Panchashti* 208)

The final blow comes when her loving husband, Shudhangshu, starts suspecting her. Mamata's story points at how a woman is unremittingly subjected to society's scrutiny, how easily she can be blamed and questioned. At every juncture of life, burdened with the unasked responsibility of protecting the honour of her community, she has to prove her purity of character and innocence of nature. The home that Mamata built up for the last eighteen years through her devotion and love was suddenly ruined by a false allegation and the people surrounding whom her life moved did not think twice before suspecting her, not even her husband, Sudhangshu. But unlike Namita and Gayatri, Mamata does not try to fit into a compromised relation; she refuses to compromise her self esteem by giving an explanation to stay in the family that does not trust her. With a commendable determination and understanding of self worth as a woman she decides to abandon the family that questions her integrity and honesty.

That fragile home of hers which turned into dust with a little blow of air Mamata does not have any attachment to it.

At the time of leaving Sudhangshu said, do you understand what will be of our honour and dignity if you walk away like this?

Mamata replied, I do understand but I cannot forget it too that that thing is not of yours alone. (211)

Female resistance of dominance and hegemony gets voiced in the short story "Behaya" too. "Behaya" is the narrative of a woman's fearless and unashamed expression of her desires and rights. The protagonist, Malati, surprises the orthodox reader with her unabashed proclamation of her desires as a wife. Set in rural Bengal, "Behaya" is the story of a night's incidents in the Ghosh family when their only son Amal, a prisoner for three years, suddenly

comes to visit his house for one last time. The dramatic story is about Atal, Manada and their only son Amal but surpassing them all who catches the attention of the readers is Amal's wife Malati. Atal Ghosh lost all he had to fight his son's three year long court case. Ashapura begins the story with an account of Atal Ghosh's present misery and affluent past. But what attracts us the most is the character of Malati. Amal, Malati's husband, was arrested and imprisoned on the basis of a false allegation of murder. The story is a theatrical representation of the night when Amal returns from prison for few hours only to go back in the morning. The Amal of the past and the prisoner Amal seem to be two different persons. We are not told what Malati was like before she got separated from her husband but we can well imagine that like her husband she has also gone through a change in her character and behaviour. Longing for the company of her husband, Malati tries her best to forbid her husband from going back. Tortured with the pain of separation she refuses to let go of him.

The story takes a dramatic turn when we find the four characters, Atal, Manada, Amal and Malati, confronting each other in a small room in the darkness of night. The otherwise simple and normal domestic setting turns into a political platform of expressing desires and rights when Malati not paying heed to her in-laws' advice snatches her husband into her room and locks the door. Atal and Manada's character can be seen as the representative of orthodox society who pity women like Malati, who silently suffers the pangs of separation, but once she starts demanding her rights and desires they do not hesitate to criticise her. Atal tries his best to prevent Amal from entering the room of Malati fearing what would people say if Malati is found impregnated later. Manada, too, tries to hold back her son to herself while a lonely Malati stands near the door enraged. In the 'perfect' family of the three Malati appears the only outsider standing near the juncture of the inner and outer world. She is family yet not entirely accepted.

She feels enraged as she is denied the object of her desire. While Amal stands perplexed at his father's unashamed hindrances, Malati boasts her claim over her husband. The title of this story is again thought provoking. Who is the *Behaya* or the shameless in the story? Is it Malati, who took her husband by hand and closed her room in front of her in laws, expressing her desire to have a child, or is it the parents who are unsympathetic to Amal and Malati? Ashapura leaves it upon the readers to reconsider and decide.

And before the sentence would end she takes the captured prisoner inside the room with a jerk.

Is it only that?

She slams the door in front of two pair of dumbstruck eyes.

....Whom should one call the most shameless if not her? (Devi, *Priyo Golpo* 161)

Women, as wives and mothers, in Ashapura Devi's short stories cannot be compartmentalised. There is no dictated structure as far as Ashapura's female characters are concerned. Rather Ashapura repeatedly disrupts the structured understanding of women in the role of mothers and wives. Therefore like mothers, as I have discussed in chapter one, women as wives too are found representing fragmented forms of femininity. In Hindu culture a girl is taught from her childhood by her family to be an obedient wife, to do her best to adjust in her 'new home'. From her childhood she is made to believe that she does not belong to her own family. This sense of unbelongingness, which dominates the female psyche, can be understood as the reason why women search for a 'home' of their own, a space that belongs to her and not anyone else. The imposed sense of inferiority in women and the false ideal of wifhood put forward through manipulated examples from mythology and legends dominate the female



psychology. Indoctrinated with phallogocentric knowledge, women often fail to understand their worth as an individual.

The fragmented nature of Ashapura's characterisation resists homogenization and universalism. As far as the portrayal of wives is concerned it is often alleged that her women character fail to challenge hegemony in spite of initial rebellion. A close reading of her short stories reveal that even when there is surrender, like in "Deshlai Baksho" and "Sambhram", it is not desired. Rather the surrender of Namita and Kanak to their claustrophobic marriages ends with a feeling of suffocation. Ashapura does not tend to romanticize reality. Patriarchal victimization is a subtle process where we often remain ignorant of our own victimhood. How often are we in reality able to walk out of our relationships? Ashapura gives us glimpses of those subtle moments through her stories which we often fail to recognize in our lives. It would be an oversimplified understanding of her writing to limit itself as the narrative of plain domesticity. Through stories like "Behaya", "Taaser Ghar" and "Brahmastra", Ashapura attempts to politicize the domestic space as a platform of women empowerment. It is interesting to note that in stories like "Ja Noy Tai" the author takes us to the secret labyrinths of Hindu conjugality. While the other characters in the stories are unaware of the reality in the lives of the female protagonists, we know the reality behind the image of a happy marriage. Ashapura reveals to us secrets which others are not able to see. Like the omniscient narrator, the readers too secretly witness the 'personal' negotiations of Namita, Mamata, Malati and Kanak.

## Chapter IV

### In Search of Her 'Home': Exploring Topophilia

One important characteristic of Ashapura Devi's works is the obsession with the idea of home. If one carefully goes through her short stories one might possibly not ignore the importance of home in the lives of the female characters. Not just as the concrete setting of her stories, but also as an abstract notion the concept of 'home' dominates the psyche of the female protagonists in her short stories. A discussion of home as a private space also calls for attention to the recent theoretical understanding of this concept in literary analysis. The term 'topophilia' although not first used but surely is popularised by the famous French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Bachelard's phenomenal work interrogates the concept of 'home' in relation to the outside world and society. He focuses on the interior space called 'home' which gives shelter to the unconscious and helps imagination to flourish. In support of his argument Bachelard cites various examples from different fields of study, one of them being literary analysis. He discussed about the importance of interiority in literature. This celebration of home, the interior space with its architectural reality is what he terms as 'topophilia'. While Bachelard's work focuses on the interior space, another critic, Philippa Tristram, in her work *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, casts a different light to the relation between the notion of 'home' and fictional works. She finds a close relation between the two and finds them interdependent. Jhumpa Lahiri in her introduction to Ashapura Devi's short stories in the collection published as *Matchbox* quotes Philippa Tristram as explaining this relation, "Most of life after all is spent within four walls, and the space they define, the objects that fill them, the prospects on which they open, inevitably influence and express our

consciousness” (Lahiri xxiv). While critics like Bachelard celebrates the concept of ‘home’ in literature as a space that provides shelter to the imagination, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their path breaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic* view home as a space that should be condemned for the oppression it exercises over its inhabitants, especially women. While discussing the nineteenth century literature they point to the confinement that a woman writer faces within the patriarchal society and the literary space which is dominated by phallogocentric nature of literature. ‘Home’ thus is not just a concrete piece of land for inhabitation, it reflects who we are. It is the contested space that both victimizes women and at the same time helps in their escape. It secures women and subordinates them at the same time. While writing about the home, and the *antahpur*, a specific part of the home inhabited by women in Indian, especially Bengali families, Anindita Ghosh in her essay “A World of Their Very Own: Religion, Pain and Subversion in Bengali Homes in the Nineteenth Century” observes: “While the existing literature on the subject treats this as a realm from which all women sought emancipation, Paradoxically in our study this domain of tradition and seclusion emerges as a female heaven of comfort and solace on the one hand and gender solidarity and struggle on the other” (Ghosh 221). Thus the notion of ‘home’ posses different connotations to different people but nonetheless the fact remains undeniable that it is more than just a place to reside in.

Ashapura Devi in one of her interviews mentions women’s position within the home, in the family as the ‘slave and the ruler’. Ashapura herself, in spite of being a popular and successful Bengali writer, did not make any public appearance until she was forty. She was not allowed to have formal education because of her gender and was not allowed to cross the boundaries of her home. Married off at the early age of fifteen she spent almost half of her life within the confinement of the *andarmahal*. When in an interview she was questioned by Partha

Chatterjee as how in an engaged state that she was in, she viewed life, Ashapura replied, "From within those four walls itself." And that she "wrote in between my domestic chores". (262) Ashapura's position as a woman author reminds us of the observation that Gibert and Gubar made. In another interview of her taken by Chitra Deb she was asked, what is the reason behind her being a successful homemaker and writer at the same time. Her answer was, "Perhaps it has been possible because I have given priority to my role as a homemaker and I have always considered my home as myself." (Deb 280) Commenting on the importance of home in the life of a woman she says, "I feel that for women the home is the ground beneath her feet and her life is the sky above." (280) To Ashapura the home and family are the roots of women's lives. They cannot avoid it. Therefore home, family and domestic life are at the heart of Ashapura's short stories. She has often been criticized as a domestic writer who only deals with trivial 'family issues'. In this chapter once again I argue that Ashapura's position as woman writer cannot and should not be cut down to only a domestic writer. 'Home' as a concrete space gets different dimensions in Ashapura's short stories. They are not mere spaces built with bricks and concretes, they have different psychological and emotional connotations as well. They emerge out as the physical metaphor of the psychological complexities of her characters. In this paper, for the sake of brevity, I've selected some of her stories where 'home' comes up as a force which decides and shapes the lives of the human characters. While stories like "Cactus", "Samner Bari", and "Hatiyar" revolve around the argument generating from one's right over his/her home, stories such as "Paka Ghar" and "Kankabatir Itikatha" shows us the subtle emotions and desires related to the notion of 'home' within the home.

**“Cactus”**

In the story “Cactus” ‘home’ takes an important form when the married couple Bharati and Shishir separate, break their ‘home’ to find new ‘homes’ for themselves. The story begins with Bharati seeking a home for them as the landlady of their present house, jealous of Bharati’s successful career, constantly pressurises them to leave the place. Bharati, a professor, finally finds relief when the college authority offers her a promotion which comes with an apartment. She starts dreaming of the house, which would be free from the taunts of the landlady and which she can decorate according to her own wish.

When she returned Ghantu had been out to play, the maid was boiling milk on a clay oven.

Clay oven of dung cakes and coal!

Bharati remembered there is a gas stove in the new home. How clean, tidy, easy and beautiful that is. Bharati has been running the household till now following the old tradition and its remnants. She never got the chance of applying her own modern ways.

(Devi, *Panchashti* 169)

But the reality dawns upon Bharati when her husband, Shishir, refuses the idea to move with her as he is not willing to stay in a house that belongs to his wife.

Her hopes hit upon some unseen wall. Shishir replied, as if with contempt, “So you are taking the residence then?”.....

Suddenly Bharati was astounded. As if some mischievous bat's wings shadowed the simple excitement and certainty with which Bharati had been dreaming of her future home.

The reason of his objection was no longer hidden to her.....

That old absurd vanity of men! They will never stop considering themselves superior to their wives. (171-172)

Was Bharati able to bring down her husband from his "false tower of prestige"? Eventually after much cajoling, thinking, humiliation, annoyance, and inner conflict we find Bharati moving in her new home with only her son. Her husband, Shishir, never goes there as it hurts his male ego to visit the place which is owned by his wife. Bharati, hurt by her husband's false male pride, recalls the numerous times she sacrificed her own wishes and desires to fit into Shishir's world. The thoughts which were buried in the deepest corners of her heart starts emerging. Shishir stayed back at their old rented house in a shared room. They made an arrangement to meet on a weekly basis and we find Shishir quite satisfied with the arrangement. While a picture of an unhappy modern family is sketched in the story, the entire argument regarding moving to Bharati's new apartment reveals to Bharati facts which she has been ignoring till then, facts regarding the one sided devotion and duty that a woman often has in her married life, where in spite of having the same and sometimes more capabilities than her husband she has to portray herself as inferior to him. Although dissatisfied, Bharati adjusts in her new home and new ways of life. Gradually both of them accept their separated new lives.

"Cactus" deals with the importance of home in Bharati's life and the complexities in her conjugal life that arise as consequence of that desire. The conflict between her and Shishir

regarding the right over space reveals to Bharati truths that she never dared to disclose to herself, truths regarding her sense of right and justice and also unexpected truths regarding her husband. Her married life, which has been erected on the base of one sided compromises and adjustments, shatters as soon as she starts interrogating them. Although Bharati wanted her husband once to visit her home and she failed to find the happiness she thought she would have in her new space which all of them would inhabit, the final decision of Bharati moving out of her husband's home in search of her own space should not be underrated. As the story shows the conflict between a couple regarding their own individual beliefs, it also points to the difference that the importance of home carries for both of them.

Does this cruel man know that no matter where a girl reaches with her education, work, designation or the complexities of that designation in her heart of hearts she only needs a 'home'?

Doesn't he understand, doesn't he know?

Or perhaps he can understand. All men can and they take advantage of this weakness in women and show that they do not need anything. They show as if the thing called 'home' is not of their dreams, their desires, it is just a residence to them. (176)

The patriarchal power play does not only regulate women but men as well and fills them with a sense of superiority and false pride so much so that their understanding stands fogged. Bharati and Shishir's confrontation regarding their home makes her realize how the notion of a space holds different significations for both of them. To Bharati it is her own space where she thinks she can exercise her will and desires, but her dreams of such a space stands shattered in the male

run world. If a woman needs her space chances are that she would have to tread the path alone as the normative world around her dominated by male ego and ideology will never let her have it.

### **“Kankabatir Itikatha”**

If “Cactus” depicts the importance of ‘home’ as a free space, in another story, “Kankabatir Itikatha”, Ashapura shows how home can also represent the claustrophobic space from where one desires to be free. Here she provides us with a character named Kankabati. Throughout the story we find the narrator relating to us the secret thoughts of Kanka at different stages of her life. The story begins with a dialogue, "Do not bend down from the edges Kanka, You will die falling down". (Devi, *Bachhai* 159) Kanka does not remember who warned her and when, perhaps it was her mother or perhaps it was someone else, but she knows that she is not allowed to go close to the edges of her terrace. The warning which she was given at some long forgotten time remained in her mind like a chant. They have left that house a long time back, she has grown up but that one warning she still carries in her mind. Although she is still afraid to climb the terrace, like a forbidden fruit it becomes more and more attractive to her. The streets with all its life and diversity seems fascinating to her. The author writes,

So she is afraid of climbing up the terrace, still she cannot do without it. She climbs it for an attraction, the same attraction that one has for forbidden things. And she must go to the edges from where the streets look mysterious, from where one can see the vehicles and the constant pushing of busy people, a constant struggle of trying to survive. (159)

Gradually the terrace and its edges start to reflect a certain possibility to her. She starts contemplating her own death. "Still", she thinks, "how easy it is to die! As if it is nothing. Just a moment's carelessness, just easing oneself a little bit, Just stretching one's light body from the



edges in a little lighter way." (159) It is not the desperate wish of committing suicide, rather to her it is "the adventurous wish of tasting the forbidden thing".(159) To her death appears as a way of finding freedom from her problems, to make others feel her importance in their lives. But her planned suicide never took place in reality. She contemplates suicide when she loses her first love, again during her marriage, then when she lost her first born and finally when her husband died. But it never happened and finally one day a middle aged Kanka was found hanging from the terrace, but strangely she was not trying to kill herself, rather she was trying hard to save herself from death.

Kankabati, through her inner conflict and desires, perhaps represents the desire of all women for freedom. She represents the feminine experience. The warning that Kanka was given in the long forgotten past is the warning women have been given since ages, to not to go to the edges and look outside, to never cross the limits that society has fixed for her. Kanka's friend once told her, "Be careful! Never climb the terrace alone. Ghosts and spirits are tempted to see beautiful girls."(159) Perhaps one does not even remember the time since when women have been scared and warned not to roam alone, to stay within the 'safe' boundaries of their 'home'. Kankabati's story reminds us of Alfred Tennyson's famous poem "Lady of Shallott". In the poem the lady was confined in an island and was forbidden to look outside at the real world because she was cursed. It was predicted that if she dared look outside she would die, just the way Kanka was threatened with death if she bends down from the edges. Like the lady in Tennyson's poem, Kanka too found the outside world mysterious and fascinating. But unlike in the poem Kanka did not die. She kept on living with all the challenges life had thrown to her. To Kanka the terrace is a space where she can claim her freedom; it is her only connection with the outside world. In Kanka's life 'home' becomes a metaphor that represents the female body she wants freedom

from. Like Tennyson's *Lady of Shallott* Kanka is imprisoned within the boundaries of her home and is forbidden from looking down on the road from the terrace, the roads which she finds enchanting and mysterious. Like Kamala in "Kasai", like Kumudini in Tagore's *Jogajog* and like numerous ordinary women Kanka finds her solace from the claustrophobic atmosphere of her 'home', dominated by gendered rules, in the terrace. Like the home in which she lives her body too is regulated and limited by rules imposed upon it. We do not for once find her outside the territory of her house. Inside the house she is restricted and forbidden from doing what she wants. Kanka therefore constantly goes back to the terrace and contemplates a way of escape from her body and her home as well. The end of the story is significant as failing the reader's expectations Kanka does not die, on the contrary she was found clutching the concrete wall to save herself, to survive. At the end the author writes, "thank god! The house was new and the cornices were strong." (165) This new house with strong cornices is the new mature and experienced Kanka, who has learnt to survive in the world. She has learnt to live with her female body, acknowledge her identity as a woman and therefore does not want to die anymore.

### **“Hatiyar”**

Home and the interior space become another important motif in the story “Hatiyar” where Rajeswari Ghosh Chowdhury, a widow fights a ten year long court case against her brother-in-law, Indranath Ghosh Chowdhury, regarding her rightful share in the house. Both Rajeswari and her step brother-in-law Indranath would share a cordial friendship before Jogin Ghosh Chowdhury, Rajeswari's father-in-law passed away. With his death their friendship turned into enmity as Rajeswari claimed her rightful portion in the house, the exterior of the house and demanded that Indranath should reside in the inner part. Indranath turned down this demand made by a woman. He refused to succumb to the ‘unlawful demands’ of an ‘outsider woman’.

Rajeswari plans to make a chamber for her son-in-law once she wins the case as for a single widow woman, she thought, it is necessary to have a male guardian. Thus a ten year long court case starts between the two. But interestingly, both of them share a very cordial relation even when they are going through the apparent feud legally. Rajeswari was the first person to file the case as she found that she was unlawfully denied her proper share in the house just because she was a woman. Indranath too, although he didn't like court cases, filed a case against her as he was not ready to be 'defetaed' by a 'mere woman'. There are other characters as well like Rajeswari's daughter and her son-in-law who have their own selfish reasons and expectations from Rajeswari. Finally at the end, after much trouble, Rajeswari wins the case and what follows after that in the story is much interesting.

The share of the house which had been snatched away from Rajeswari once she became a widow is gained back by her, after much speculation, determination and sense of justice. Ashapura writes, "Her neighbours, to tell it right, were not happy. Why will they be? Who likes to see such an uncontrollable woman win? Even women themselves do not like it." (Devi, *Chhoto Golpo Sankolon* 146) But to the utter surprise of Indranath, at the end of the story, she refuses to take that share of the house for which she have been fighting for so long. When Indrannath asks her the reason she replies,

Then well. That's right, pride...One who does not have anything, pride is her only strength...let me ask you, doesn't a widow need a strong base beneath her feet to live standing upright? That court case had been the ground beneath Rajeswari Ghosh Chowdhury's feet. Would any of you obey and respect me, even if I spent my life in your temples, if that case was not there? (148)

She reveals that she did all these to maintain her dignity and value. She didn't want to remain in one corner of the house like a helpless creature and the court case helped her to prove that she has her pride and is not a helpless widow. The climax of the story surprises the reader most and amuses us with the sensibility and self esteem that Rajeswari shows for herself. At the end when a surprised Indranath asks her, "And what about the chamber for your son-in-law?" Rajeswari replies, "Will I establish my son in law here in my home? Do you take me for a fool? Will I have any freedom of my own then?"(148) Unlike the other two stories discussed above, Rajeswari's story amuses us with her intelligence and presence of mind. She uses the cause of her son-in-law as a weapon to fight the court case. She is not unaware of the nature and purposes of everyone around her, even her own daughter and son-in-law who were there supporting her for their own selfish reason. Never, for once, in the story has Rajeswari's character asked for the readers' pity. Rather we begin to respect her for her pride and sense of dignity. She uses her claim over her 'home', over the space as a *hatiyar* or weapon to keep her pride intact.

### **“Paka Ghar”**

The dream to own a home and its consequent complexities find place in the short story, “Paka Ghar”. “Paka Ghar” revolves around the story of two brothers, Manotosh and Mahitosh and their respective wives, Padma and Chanpa. The story starts with the extremely loving relation amongst the four of them and the only desire to own a home.

It doesn't matter if there is not the glow of electric light, the kerosene light is not any less luxurious...This is a palace compared to the mud house whose roof is made with hay.

This is not just a home; it feels like God's own abode! ...what else could they wish more in this universe? (Devi, *Galposamagra*, Vol III 225)

The two sisters-in-law dream of a terrace where they would climb to dry their long wet hairs in the sunlight, from where they, like all the other women, would bend over to witness the moving picture of everyday life. Their dreams regarding the home get bigger day after day. But the better their desire for a perfect home gets the more they start moving away from each other. Gradually they start to decorate their home, make it better but somehow underneath the desperate desire for a home the women lose each other. The desire to possess the space creates fissure between their intimate relations. As Mahitosh, the younger brother starts to earn more, the intimacy between the two sisters-in-law turns into domestic power play. As Mahitosh, Chanpa's husband, starts to earn more, she boasts greater claim over the house. The bond of sisterhood that she shared till now with Padma starts vanishing and one day the middle aged widow Padma was ordered to shift into the store room, as there was no room for her in the main house. She was ostracized by all as they considered her old and a burden. Padma, after suffering from fever and isolation, passes away one day.

Padma's death proved to be only one side of the coin, the other starts getting visibility with Chanpa's downfall. The same Chanpa, who once betrayed her sister-in-law for the desire of her ownership over the home, shared the same fate when her son asks her to move out. As her son starts to earn more, Chanpa finds it hard to adjust to the new ways of life and one day she was instructed to shift in the store room, the same store room where she once exiled Padma. The author gives a heart wrenching description of destiny's justice,

When Padma was made to take shelter in the store room, did Chanpa considered it as hard? Chanpa is also now a single widow, what does she need an entire room for?

When after Mahitosh's death she started to dust out and use the clay oven once used by Padma, she hardly imagined that one day she would have to use her broken bed as well.

(236)

While Chaanpa and Padma's cordial relation turns into jealousy over the possession of spaces inside the house, home as a concept stays beyond their grasp. The home Padma dreamt for herself was lost in the luxuries of urban life, on the other hand Chanpa's desire of home turns into a selfish desire of possession. But ironically she suffered the same fate as Padma and we know that in the future Jyotsna, Chanpa's daughter-in-law, too would have the same destiny as the other two women before her. As home, instead of being a shelter of peace, turns into an object of material gain it starts to elude the women. All of them desired a home which they never get. The lack of solidarity among the women and the growing tendency to drag the other down never let them conquer the space which all of them desired so earnestly. The desired 'home' would only come with solidarity among women until then it will keep being a disenchanting fleeting concept.

These remarkable short stories by Ashapura put light on different meanings and psychological attributes that the notion of 'home' possesses. Home becomes an extension and a physical metaphor of its residents' characters in another story, "Samner Bari". Umarani, an old fashioned orthodox woman, constantly feels jealous of the people of the opposite house, especially the women, whom she condemns as extremely modern and 'fashionable'. She keeps on criticizing them for every movement they make, yet she cannot help being curious about them. She never liked the fact that her husband is in cordial terms with the couple of that house. In spite of much encouragement from her husband's side she does not have any life beyond her domestic chores and further refuses to have any. Her home reflects, very aptly, her own

personality. The entrance of the house is filled with garbage and litter which reflect the rotten old customs that she still clings on to. On the other hand her rival household appears as more progressive because of its members' progressive thinking. Their home reflects their personalities. At the end of the story Umarani's husband becomes unconscious and it is their rival house's members who help her and still Umarani criticises the mistress of that house and questions her character. Besides presenting the interior space as an extended representation of the psychology and perspectives of its residents, Ashapura also shows how women like Umarani, brainwashed by the patriarchal way of thinking, have chained themselves. They are suffering a self imposed confinement and are critical of those of their own sex who seek freedom. Umarani's home and its interior reflects the claustrophobic nature of her own mind. A close example of home as a concept can be found in the story "Anupamar Ghar" as well. Married off into an orthodox family, Anupama dreams of a home of her own. She dreams of freedom from the claustrophobic atmosphere of her in-laws' house. And finally one day her dream comes true. She has her own house but just before she would shift to the new house her husband died and she realises that like all the furnitures she accumulated in the desire of moving into her own home, her dreams of a home is also damaged. Both the stories revolve around a single desire, the desire of owning a home. But the desire seems to be an unattainable one as the relations that make the home a peaceful abode are hindered in the way.

In "Cactus" the argument over choosing home results in breaking up the one that Bharati and Shishir have been living in. Both of their notions of home were very different from each other and eventually it revealed the true reality of their present life. For Bharati the home was a shelter, a space where she will have the freedom to do everything according to her choice whereas to her husband it is also related with his male ego. Bharati becomes aware of the subtle

gender politics and her husband's insecurity when he rejects the proposal to move in with her. In Kankabati's case the home becomes a living metaphor of her own self, her own body from which she was seeking escape. Her plan to commit suicide was a way of getting away from the restrictions put on her. She found solace standing on the edge of her terrace, something she was forbidden to do. No matter how many houses she changes the terrace to her still remains like that forbidden fruit which she must have. The terrace for her becomes that separate space where she can be herself. On the other hand in "Hatiyar" Rajeswari uses the home as a weapon to protect herself from the pity and sympathy of others. The court case for a rightful space within the home was necessary for her to keep her dignity and authority intact. At the end of the story she is discovered as a very clever and sensible woman who is aware of the ways of the world and for whom the court case regarding her home was not just a matter of acres of land. Her demand over the home was demand for her own free space. "Samner Bari" shows two houses, two homes in a contrasting position; one is foil to another. They are opposite each other and are absolute contrast to each other. Umarani's opposite house, inhabited by the Choudhurys and the home of Umarani represents two different times, two different ways of thinking: modern and orthodox. The home Umarani lives in gradually comes to symbolise the psychological space she has created for herself, like her home her mindset is also unclean and messy. It lacks the sense of beauty and open mindedness that the Choudhury home and its members possess.

'Home' in Ashapura thus takes on various meanings at various levels and is filled with psychological symbolism. The search for a separate home or a desire for a terrace and verandah or a window within the home is not uncommon in Ashapura's novels and short stories. Satyabati in *Pratham Pratisruti* desires for a separate home, Subarnalata could not ask for that much, what she wanted was a verandah. All her life Subarnalata craved for that one small space,



the verandah. This desire for a separate home or a specific part within the home result from the desire of having an autonomous space for one's own self. The verandah to Subarnalata was not just another part of the household. To her it represented the medium which will connect her with the outer world. It was her only way of escaping from the oppression of daily life in her in-law's house. To Satyabati as well a home in Kolkata was not just a physical space. It was an emotional escape from the regressive life that confined her.

The desire for a separate space and the struggle to escape the confinement within the home can also be found in stories like "Kasai". In "Kasai" we find Kamala, the protagonist, looking for a space within the home where she can escape from the taunts of her sisters-in-law. "Kasai" is the story of Kamala, a mother whose child is suffering through some unknown disease that makes him cry all the time. Kamala is helpless as she cannot attend her sick son. Her sisters-in-law start taunting her the moment she goes to attend the child. They curse the innocent child as well. Her husband gets irritated handling the child and leaves him at the door of the kitchen. Kamala cannot do anything except watching him cry. Finally irritated by the incessant crying Kamala was released from her domestic chores to attend her child. In the next scene we see Kamala sitting in the terrace with her child in her lap looking up at the starry sky while she starts crying. The moment is crucial as it is the moment of emotional release for her. The few minutes in the terrace provides her escape from the cruel claustrophobic atmosphere of her home. The terrace though a part of the home becomes a different home for her, a home that gives her shelter, freedom and a space which she does not need to compromise with.

Home, as a politicized idea, therefore, is an important motif and plays the central role in most of Ashapurna Debi's short stories. The interior space is filled with complex connotations in her works. Topophilia and the demand for a separate space turn into the demand for an

autonomous feminine space in her works. Almost all of her women characters are obsessed with the idea of home which is a conflicting space as it oppresses them and yet they do not get the courage to reject it. Therefore they search for escape within the home through windows, verandahs and walls. Home also emerges out as the extension of the personalities of the characters who inhabit it. Ashapura herself possessed the experience of a life confined within the home and here we find her in a paradoxical position. While in her essays and interviews she again and again emphasizes on the importance of home as the root, in her fictional works, especially in her short stories we notice that she is questioning it. She is criticizing the family as it tries to hold the woman back. Her characters are often seen as seeking an escape from the confinement of the four walls. This conflict and constant struggle of the characters is perhaps a result of the tension surrounding the notion of 'home' in the author herself who certainly cannot be dismissed as a mere 'domestic writer.'

## Conclusion

The setting of her stories, home, becomes a politicized idea in Ashapura's works as it suggests the space, used to dominate women, and also the space where she finds her emotional escape. A self-contradictory approach can be found on the part of the author regarding the notion of home as we find her interrogating the same idea of home in her short stories and novels which she describes as unavoidable in the lives of women in some of her non-fictional writings. Ashapura's understanding of the importance of home has been self-contradictory. In her interview to Chitra Deb she confesses, "Till I was 40 no one actually knew who Ashapura Devi was and often considered it to be the pseudonym of a male author....on second thoughts, the reason for their thinking me to be a male author was because of the fact that in my erstwhile compositions the 'me' was a 'man'; in a way I happened to look at society from male perspective". (271) The same Ashapura, who considered home and family as the root of women's lives, confesses to Partha Chatterjee in her interview that she had to struggle because "literature was never given priority over family life" (261) She also strongly asserted in the interview while talking about women's bondage that "She needs a family where she will be both slave and ruler. This is an impediment to her emancipation" (263) Perhaps this inner conflict in Ashapura is the result of her struggle to come to terms with the priorities of life as a woman, a conflict which is perhaps experienced by all women when she has to choose between the home and the world. But Ashapura's perspective of the world has evolved over time. Her change in perspective is evident in her non-fictional works. In her essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality" Ashapura protests, "Man is the maker of that world, and woman's duty is to make him a home....man for the world, and woman for man—this was the idea. The sleep does not last forever. Her sense of unworthiness caused her to wake up to long neglected pain and she asked

herself, 'why was I never called out into the world of work? Should I be content with this insignificant role within the four walls of my home?'...Her rising consciousness showed her the chasm between masculine and feminine values." (20)

Ashapura Devi's short stories as discussed in the four chapters question the truth and validity of social norms. Her profound understanding of her characters' psychology enables us to experience the hitherto unexplored sides of human realities. Her female characters defy the culture of structured portrayal of women. Ashapura consciously deconstructs the feminine to explore the hidden and unexpected possibilities of female psychology. In India a woman's identity is primarily limited to being a mother and wife which demands certain prescribed behaviours from her. In her short stories Ashapura defies and subverts the normative understanding of women. Another important point to notice in Ashapura's writing is her emphasis on the idea of female solidarity. In her stories there are numerous examples where it is the women who victimize their own sex. The emphasis on the need of female solidarity in order to get freedom from patriarchal oppression is one of the recurrent themes in her writings. She again and again emphasizes on the idea of sisterhood in her writings as the only way out to achieve the desired independence. She complains in the same essay mentioned above, "Women seldom have groups or associations of permanent kind. Each one is adrift in her own delicate little boat...If we want this state of things to change we must have a strong sense of solidarity."(22) She professes, "It seems to me that only an organized women's movement can raise the level of male consciousness in our society. Men must be made to see that this world is not their exclusive possession, it belongs to both sexes." (23)

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