

**Transition from Tradition to Modernity: A Reading of Ashapurna
Debi's Novels**

Audity Nowshin

Id: 08303001

Department of English and Humanities

April, 2012



BRAC University

Transition from Tradition to Modernity: A Reading of Ashapurna Debi's Novels

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Humanities
of BRAC University

By
Audity Nowshin
Id: 08303001

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for The Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English
April 2012

Dedication

To Ma,

When I was kid always gave me pressure on learning. She used to say *poro*, *poro... portehobe*. In those time I got very angry and asked myself why me???

She only said, "one day you will understand"

Now I got her point.

She is the torch bearer of my life.

Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Professor Syad Manzoorul Islam. Without his concern and guidance, it would not have been possible for me to complete this thesis.

My mentor, my father, Professor Abul Hossain Ahmed Bhuiyan is remembered with deepest emotions for being there for me with his support, guidance and love, whenever I need him.

I am thankful to all the faculties of the Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University, especially Professor Firdous Azim, Kris Peleg, Sayeed Mohammad Noman, Kaiser Haq, Rukhsana Rahim Chowdhury, Mushira Habib, and Nausheen Naz Yusuf for their inspiration and encouragement throughout the years of my Undergraduate Program.

My younger brother Dipro who was always gave me a constant pressure and support to finish my paper by time. Without his support it would not have been possible to concentrate on my thesis.

A special thanks to Hameem vaiya for allowing me to use his media lab computer for a quiet time to write my thesis sitting there.

Sonika apu has supported me whenever I loose my track on thinking process of my argument.

I would like to give a special thanks to my dearest friends Dipita, Jannatul, Nashid, Shabnam, Tonny, Zarin, Nazmul and cousins Arka and Reevu, for their constant support whenever I need them.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2-3
Chapters	
1. Social Reformation.....	4- 13
2. Urbanization and Urban Life.....	14- 24
3. Women's Liberty and Political Movement in Bengal towards Modernity.....	25- 31
Conclusion.....	32- 33
Works Cited.....	34- 35

Abstract

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial Bengal experienced a contradictory and radical change in terms of society, politics and family life. These changes influenced every sphere of life particularly women sphere. The self-exploration of women and the development of women's condition were always thought as the negative and wasted part of human life. As a result, women have always struggled against or with the family as well as with the society to find out a space for their own.

About hundred a year back a woman had always treated as the tool of the house whose only responsibilities are in home making, child bearing and taking care of her husband. The rigid family traditions and values, more specifically the Hindu elite Brahmin, restricted the women from seeing the outer world or getting engaged with it. Time and tradition have defined a woman's space within the household.

Ashapura Debi's intergenerational novels *The First Promise* (1964) and *Subarnalata* (1966) depict the women's condition and struggle in the 20th century. These novels also focus their effort on the transition from tradition to modernity as well as the female consciousness of a particular time and space. In Satyabati's life reader gets the sense of modernization, whereas through Subarnalata reader gets the consequences of the modernization process; a transition from being colonized to become an independent state of the world- India. This thesis aims to examine the process of change to show how women within her own space struggled to produce an environment of liberty and freedom. In the process, both narration and the critical examination of the novels will be carried out to present women's struggle of the time that approached to come out from the cage.

Introduction

Women's role in species reproduction has rendered 'natural' a process that is deliberately constructed in order to dominate them (Bagchi, 1)

Women are always considered as the reproductive and submissive part of the society. They can only participate in child bearing and home making. Mahasweta Devi's story *Breast-Giver* (1987) also show the sector of women's reproduction that only confined in a rigid and conservative space particularly in Bengal society of 20th century. The protagonist of this story Jashoda who was appointed as a professional mother indulged her whole life to bear the children of Haldar family. She 'becomes the infants' suckling mother' (Spivak, p. 228) to save the figure shape of the daughter-in-laws of Haldar family. Ironically, Jashoda is sacrificing her own body to support her employer in return of nothing only a good amount of food. This story is my inspiration to form the main focus of my thesis. I will show the other side of women who passively contributed in the process of modernization in Bengal though they got nothing in return.

First chapter deals with the social changes in 20th century Bengal. These changes are formed by women and formed for women. The two protagonists of Ashapurna Debi's novels *The First Promise* (1964) and *Subarnalata* (1966), Satyabati and Subarnalata passively took part of the developing process of Bengal. They inspire others to become educated that bring the radical changes in their society. They particularly inspire the women to learn and they take the part of educating them actively. This chapter also deals with the religious reformation that helps Satyabati and Subarnalata to bring the changes.

Urbanization is the core factor to bring the changes in the colonial Bengal is discussed in the second chapter. In this chapter I discuss on the impact of urbanization on women and their surroundings. The protagonists' experiences and others actions are the main focus of this chapter. It narrates the core issues of transforming a society from traditional to modernity.

The third chapter discusses about the issues of women's liberation along with political struggle in gaining an independent state. It also discusses on the process of transition from tradition to modernity from women's aspects. Both Satyabati and Subarnalata have faced the transition and become a part of this process.

Together these three chapters will demonstrate the process of modernization in Bengal. These will also show how women within own space struggled to produce an environment of liberty and freedom. In the process, both narration and the critical examination of the novels will be carried out to present women's struggle of the time that approached to come out from the social barrier and make the transition of Bengal.

Social Reformation

After the battle of Polashi (Plassey), and after further clashes, notably the battle at Buxer in 1764, the British East India Company established itself as the de facto ruler of Bengal. With its rule over Bengal Company brought new system in administration that disseminated throughout the elites of the society. New rulers represented modern norms and regulations that brought under observation not only the elites of the society but also the general mass. The process of modernization started with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, through the Society foundation of modern phenomena that deployed within the domain of modern knowledge that represented and exercised.

For about fifty years of its establishment the Asiatic Society was under the control of the European intellectual climate that produced and developed local data based knowledge in various fields using European methodology. The knowledge was used in the establishment of English education centers in Bengal, particularly in Kolkata. A peculiar kind of socio-cultural process associated with the process of modernization that emerged and liberated the Bengali elite from a specific historical period of Culture.

Rammohun Roy (1772- 1833), the first great modernizer and the father of the 19th century's Renaissance, foretells a vision of cross-cultured mentality where modernity will dictate everyday life. In Dasgupta's words,

...the construction of a cross-culture mentality involving Indian and Western cultures is the most consequential creative achievement of the Bengal Renaissance (Dasgupta, 74).

Influenced by the idea of late 18th century modernity, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), a 19th century social reformer, created a movement to liberate Hindu widow wife from the unhappy life. It was a movement that influenced by the British rational world, where no matter where from a person, surfaced his or her independent identity as a social being is above everything. Vidyasagar's social reform movement created contradiction within Hindu Bengali Society between the modernist and the non-modernist. However, the wave of liberty that dislocated the Hindu Bengali families and part of the society stood in favor of the movement. In the second novel *Subarnalata*, this wave placed in a very good way through the widow marriage of Mallika, the niece of Subarnalata. This incident is a good example because through her marriage, it depicts the changes in the urban middle class life in Kolkata. It echoes the religious transformation that break through the rigidness and conservativeness of that particular time period.

The first novel, that I am going to discuss, is Ashapura Debi's *The First Promise* (1964). The novel tells the background story of a society in Independent Bengal. The story narrates the transformation of the society in terms of education, religion and customs of the 20th century's Bengal. In this chapter, I am going to focus on the life of Satyabati, whose effort makes the transitional process in Bengal and helps to upgrade her society under the light of world knowledge, particularly the women sector.

The story moves around the protagonist Satyabati. In the story she is an eight-year old girl from a *Kulin Brahmin*¹ family. Satyabati portrays the rebellious figure of woman who challenges the conventional values of Hindu society, although she belongs in a rigid and traditional Hindu society. In many ways, Satyabati can be compared with the modern woman

¹Kulin Brahmin is the elitist caste of Hindu religion.

of today. During her early years, in her father's house, she was the only girl who learns to write and read. When she was in her teens, in the 20th century, in Bengal, it was not expected that a girl should read or write. Learning was a taboo for most, if not all Hindu girls. But Satyabati is an exception. She wants to know what would happen if she becomes educated. Her curiosity to know the truth of learning motivates her to learn. As she says to Neru, Satyabati's childhood friend, "I'd like to know what happens if a woman touches this [palm] leaf. So many women read and write in Calcutta" (The First Promise, 124). Satyabati's bildungsroman shows a picture of late 19th century's Bengal, where women did not get any space to enlighten them. They were forced to live a life of drudgery within the four walls of home. Their talents were unrecognized so it was impossible for them to participate in the family decision making process or to involve themselves in the public domain. Satyabati's story presents a different picture. It shows how a girl who was born and brought up in a conventional Hindu family struggles to get education and eventually curves up own niche.

The process of modernization in colonial Bengal started with women's emancipation. It was however not something that happened in a day but took a long time and a great deal of struggles on the part of women themselves to achieve the change. Satyabati instinctively knows that education can be a possible way to emancipate her own self. She wants to have institutional education that is a part of modernity. The narrator of this novel, Satyabati's grandchild Bakul emphasizes the aspects of institutionalization constantly told by her grandmother and by her mother.

In the same way, *Subarnalata* (1966) conveys the same notion of modernization. Subarnalata, the protagonist of the second book and the only daughter of Satyabati also holds the same belief like her mother. She is also married early but wants to educate her children. However, Subarnalata's in-laws do not want to send the female child to school. Subarnalata's marriage was also something that reminds one of life's ironies. Her grandmother and her father rid

offer her by giving her marriage when she was 11 in a very traditional and rigid family. Satyabati does not know about this plan and later when she finds out that she has lost her daughter, she simply abandons her family. She went to Kashi, to her father, to find out the truth of the marriage. It has to be mentioned here, that Satyabati learns by her life that the condition of Bengal women cannot get better because of all decisions of the family are taken by the male members and women have no voice, not even in regard to fair marriage. In this case, a girl cannot say anything about herself or cannot participate in any decision making process. Subarnalata in her life time tries to speak about the importance of institutional education but it is neglected in every time.

In *Subarnalata*, Ashapurna Debi shows a different context of woman in comparison with the first novel. She shows the factors bringing a transition for women as well as for the society. Debi portrays two female figures as her protagonists who convey the message of the modern world. In the cases of Satyabati and Subarnalata, they become the faces of tragedy in moment fight against the society. Satyabati fails to complete her daughter's institutional education; similarly Subarnalata fails to send her daughters to school except the youngest one, Bakul.

Satyabati plays a vital role in bringing in modernistic sensibilities. Being a woman does not hold her back but gives her strength to move forward. In Kolkata, she teaches women to read and write. Her desires to get along with the wider world of knowledge and inspire other women have given her space to her self-exploration. In her young age she has realized that only education can liberate individuals and inspire them to find themselves in the contemporary world. Later, when she goes back to her father, her only job is to educate the female children in her area. While Satyabati gets busy to develop the potentials of the girls in her area, in Kashi, her daughter starts a new life in her in laws' house. The family she is married to is very orthodox and does not allow the women to read or to speak with the male members of the family. On the other hand, Subarnalata's journey begins with the endeavor to

enlighten her family members. She subscribes to a newspaper in their house which is quite unusual for the family. As she believes newspaper can give her the knowledge of outside world which is vital for self-development. She requests her husband to bring the paper. This attempt is criticized by the male members of the family. Her brother-in-law desperately wants to forbid the newspaper in their house because he thinks that it will bring the disasters for the family. However the brother-in-law does not continue with his objection and finally retreats. And Subarnalata is finally able to read the newspaper. She then becomes able to bring the light of knowledge in her house.

Starting with the late 19th century the colonized administration introduced measures to educate the girl children. Religious missions were also set up in different parts of India to some other purpose. Rich and upper middle class families who were sometime kept the governesses to teach the female members of the family English and the etiquette of the modern society. As we see in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*, Bimala learns to play piano because for her husband. Her instructor is an English lady who teaches her how to read English novels as well. Their stories however have two implications- one, that women are dependent on her their husband, two the women are not simply but the colonized men should learn about the English culture in order to develop themselves. Bimala's husband Nikhil believes that it is needed for the colonized to know about English culture to upgrade oneself and to participate in the modern world. As a result, such guided development of women was highly accepted and appreciated at those times. Barbara Southard in her book *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal 1921- 1936*, also says that "men took the initiative in making possible the changes in the life- style of women" (Southard, 10). She also mentions GhulamMurshid's view on women's development. She says, quoting Murshid, "men striving for modernity found it 'impossible to advance their society or to fulfil their own lives without uplifting their women'" (Southard

10). The mission of emancipating women was initially seen as a way of articulating the development of women; it was not seen as an articulation the development of the society. The underlying meaning of these processes was not only developing the women but also showing the power of men in those times. For example, Bimala from *The Home and the World* is able to participate in the learning process because her husband wants her to do so. As a result, the first intention was to educate the female partner to make a comparable couple in the society but the underlying goal was to establish the authority of men. The creation of *bhadralok* (the gentry) class was the key path to create *bhadramahila* (respectable women) (Chatterjee, 246) class. However, this need has only focused on the *modernization* of Bengal rather to 'emancipate' or to 'liberate' the women. On the other hand, this process of modernization made the male figure stronger and lessened the possibility of women because it is clearly indicates that if a man wishes to teach his wife or daughter or sister, then she will be able to learn or to become educated. It is not her choice to become a part of the modernization process. Satyabati is able to learn because her father wants it and later it becomes her wish to educate her sons and daughters.

Additionally, the development of Bengal also points the issue of creating a *new patriarchal system* (Chatterjee, 244). Women's development imposes the new responsibilities on them. In the early period women's space was only confined within the household but in the new and transformed society women maintain both *ghar* (inner world) and *bahir* (outer world) (Chatterjee, 238). In the story of Satyabati, Satyabati maintains both spaces. She manages her house as well as she goes to the school to educate women.

Moreover, Satyabati includes herself in the teaching process of women. The story of Suhas, daughter of Shankari, can show some light on this aspect of her education. Shankari is an out caste because she gets married to a different caste man. More importantly she is a widow and gets married again which was not permitted in those times. Satyabati teaches Suhas and tries

to introduce her to the intellectual and modern world of Bengal. She hands her over to an educated person Bhabatosh Master. Bhabatosh master is one of the reformers of time who tries to lead the society in a different way. He converted from his patriarchal religion, traditional Hinduism to *Brahmoreligion* introduced by the *Brahmo Society*. He has been deserted by his own society but his intuition to improve the condition of the Bengali society does not hold him back. The belief of the *Brahmo Society* as Southard narrates in her book *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal 1921- 1963*, in fact "...only by freeing women and by treating them as human beings could Indian society free itself from social stagnation" (11).

Similarly, Subarnalata starts teaching the children of the family. She creates an atmosphere of respect to learning though sometimes it is hindered by her brother- in- law, who always tries to mock her. Her brother- in- law Provash is a lawyer but does not believe in the development of womanhood as well as society. He wants to hold on to strict traditional values that do not allow him to compromise or to help Subarnalata to enlighten their family.

Moreover, learning English language was one of the tools to improve the Bengal society. Statistics show that "in the nineteenth century, high percentages of upper caste males learned English and looked for careers in the British bureaucracy, or in the view Westernized educational institutions and modern professions (Southard, 44). Nabakumar, husband of Satyabati, studies English to get a job in the British administration in Bengal. In those times, in the early 20th century it was a phenomenon and well accepted that colonized people will learn the colonizers' language. The replacing of the British colonizers or creating another ruling class was made this process rapidly. The western knowledge brought a radical change

in the colonial Bengal. As a result, the education system, professionalism and many more have developed in these times.

Similarly, by the beginning of the 20th century, the modern medicine in Bengal was founded successfully but it was only confined in the city. It was a defined factor that cleared up various things such as superstitious and rigid religious beliefs. The ancient method of medical treatment such as ayurveda was profoundly replaced by modern medicine. For example, Satyabati's father Ramkali was an ayurvedic doctor. His ayurvedic treatment is appreciated but not welcomed in everywhere. In the course of developing the Bengal the traditional treatment system was taken by the modern science and so thus the English *white doctor*² took the place of village doctor and the perception of the society. Satyabati calls the white doctor for her husband's treatment instead of calling her own doctor father. She rejects her father's medicine for her husband because of her own family problem as well as her disbelief on the traditional method of treatment. She saw the death of her friend Raghu who was died because of the bite of a snake and her father was unable to save him. Her perception about traditional patient treatment became changed because of this incident. However, her initiative to call white doctor takes the modernization process a bit further in her life. In the process, she brings a change in the life of Baruipur's people. People's doubt about the white doctor's treatment is been cleared up through her strong step to break down the traditional and rigid values and behavior. In the same way, in the novel *Subarnalata*, Subarnalata calls a doctor instead of a *kabiraj*³ to save her sister in law's life. It was quite new for them.

² White doctor refers to doctor who belongs to the colonizers' class. It is a racial discrimination but the privilege goes to the white doctor.

³Kabiraj is the Bengali term for a traditional herbal doctor. They do not have a professional degree for medical treatment and depend on their intuition and experience.

In both novels Debi shows the changes of life. The process of being independent or having the wind of liberalism puts all these incidents as a mark of modernization. The transition from the rigid and conventional society to the modern society is associated through the changes in women's position, the development in the intellectual world and a desire for liberty of the people.

Ashapura Debi also holds the change in terms of caste discrimination and religious conflict in her novels. She narrates her story in a way that also touches the sensitive issues like religion. In the first novel *The First Promise*, Suhas is the child of a widow mother, Shankari. Shankari, who used to live in Satyabati's father's house, eloped with a man who belongs to a different caste. Their marriage is not a successful one and Shankari is being treated badly by her newlywed husband. He abandons her after hearing about her pregnancy. Satyabati brings them back to her house in Kolkata and tries to give her and her child a comfortable life. However, even in Kolkata it was not accepted that a woman who has broken caste rules can be treated well. Moreover, Shankari's remarriage is also criticized by the family and society. Being a widow, her attempt to get married again is not accepted by her own people. Shankari's remarriage brings out the complexity of a widow's remarriage. In the late 19th century there was a movement for widows led by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar along with several members of Brahmo Samaj, who "took the lead to [reform], the agitation for women's right" (Southard, 52). Their contribution to liberate women's situation in colonial Bengal was criticized and some of them become deserted from their society. Debi's story captures the moment of the movement in compare with her past situation in Bengal when women were bound to live a widow life after their husband's death. They did not have any choice to start a new life, even a child bride remains widow in her whole life after her husband's death. Debi shows the radical changes in the life of Satyabati and her surroundings.

Satyabati's father Ramkali, who is a village *ayurvedic* doctor and a member of the orthodox society, allows his daughter to become educated that was quite unfamiliar in his time. It was a belief that if a woman learns to read or write, she must become widow. Neither Satyabati nor Subarnalata becomes widow and that allow them to move further in the way to modernity.

Moreover, Ramkali, father of Satyabati, was an *ayurvedic* doctor. He is a Kulin Brahmin but becomes the village doctor. It was not welcomed by his society. During his early age he left his house because his father beat him for his unusual behavior and beliefs on god. His doubts about god's presence influence him to leave his house. Later he took the shelter in a village physician's house who belongs to a lower caste of him. However he ate separately due to his higher class which made question of caste discrimination. Gobinda Gupta the physician never allows his Brahmin student to have meal with them even Ramkali wanted to have meal with them. Ramkali, from a very conservative family, wants to avoid caste discrimination but his own society does not allow him to do it. Even when he comes back to his house, he has to pass a *caste purity test*⁴ set up by his own society. The question arises about his dignity towards his belief and social position.

⁴ In hindu religion who wants to come back to his own caste again, has to give a test of his belief.

Urbanization and Urban Life

In the course of development, the city offers a path map to the modernization of underdeveloped Bengal. Establishing a city indicates the structural as well as social changes in any country. In this chapter I focus my discussion on the process of urbanization and urbanization itself in the light of Satyabati's life. It also focuses on the other characters as well that signify the modernization process in Bengal along with urbanizing a state. The urbanization process in Bengal, in the 19th and 20th century brought the fundamental changes in human's life. For example, people are engaging themselves in the institutional profession instead of continuing their ancestral profession or traditional profession. Nabakumar, husband of Satyabati, migrates to Kolkata to have institutional jobs instead of doing ancestral job in village.

In Satyabati's life, city plays an important role. She, with her family, moves to Kolkata (*the City of Light*), from her in laws' village, Baruipur in against her in laws' wishes. She wants to educate her children and enrich their life with world knowledge. Her self-apprehension makes her to believe that only Kolkata, the door of modern knowledge, can give her and her descendants a space for self-development. In Kolkata she comes in touch with the nationalist movement that had a profound impact on the history of Bengal. Her involvement in women's education and her faith in nationalist causes are only possible in this city. Here she can bring together her own traditional values and modern knowledge together that leads her to a new and distinctive life. In Kolkata Satyabati finds a space to nurture her individual spirits and social values. She starts teaching at a school for women without her husband's permission. She also insists her sons to attend school and educates an ostracized woman's daughter, Suhas.

As Satyabati begin to grow intellectually and emotionally, her behavior and thoughts get more sophisticated. Each and every event in her life leads her towards the future. She learns by her life that makes her important realization about life. Her consciousness begins to stabilize her moods and feelings. For example, the death incident of Raghu (Debi, 159), her childhood friend, is the turning point in her life. It makes her to believe in herself and helps to take decisions about her own life. She was only nine years old then but nevertheless asked her father to send her off to her in laws' house, in Baruipur. She said,

Yes, I shall go in. But my mind is disturbed, Baba. Raghu's death has opened my eyes. If in god's world there are no rules about time, and no laws either, then how can there be any such rule in man's world? Today it hurts you to send me away, but if death should come and ask for me, you'd have to hand me over..... Will you be able to say then that "It is not time yet. This isn't the rule?" (Debi, 173)

However, her decision indicates her strong personality that was quite unusual in compare with her surroundings. Her courage and inner strength to face the trouble indicate the development of women in Bengal. Later she says to her father that, "You lost your dignity the day you humbled yourself and gave me away (Debi, 174). Granoff says that Satyabati "is the unusual daughter of an unusual father and refuses to be silent in the face of what she feels is the oppression of women in the traditional Hindu family" (197). Her decision to leave her parents' house at the age of nine is quite unusual but it proves her depth and dignity. She dose what she believes. And that's why her migration to the city becomes a valuable. By moving from village to the city, Satyabati articulates her desire to get involved with the outer sphere of the society and the modern and advanced world. Before her migration, her world was only situated in the inner part of her house like any other woman. Neither Nitandapur nor Baruipur allows her to get involved in the world outside. Gender roles are strictly handled in both these

villages indeed in the whole Bengal and that decides the space for both man and woman. As ParthaChatterjee mentions in his article The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, "social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir" (239). As a result, Satyabati's move to the city leads to the resolution of her independence and individuality that corresponds with modernity. Moreover, her migration also motivates other women in her society to move to urban city along with their husband. In past they used to believe that if they move to urban life; they will be cursed or doomed. Their religious position would face damnation. However, after Satyabati's migration, they have a slight change in their mind. As Nitai, friend of Nabakumar comes to take his wife Bhabini to Kolkata; his uncle- aunt easily permits him to take his wife with him. In this situation, they bring the example of other women also who moved with their husband in urban area.

As Debi mentions,

...in recent years, a number of the village wives had gone with their husbands. ...
Therefore, there would be no longer of loosing caste, if Nitai took his wife to Calcutta
(Debi, 372).

Furthermore, urban life gives the space to Satyabati to have a simple and descent life. Her management of her household gets more sophisticated in this city. She tries to maintain a good life within her space. For example, the landlord of their rented house sends food in a festival and she tries to return the emptied potand bowl instead of keeping then. As she said, "Just wait, let me return the pot and the bowl" (Debi, 322). But the wife of landlord does not want to take those because she thinks she has given these away. Satyabati finds this very odd

and feels such a patronizing attitude of the landlord compromises her position. As a result, she wants to give back the pot and bowl. It is a custom to show respect in return of a service which Satyabati holds by her inner soul. The city values mix up with her inherited values. Giving back those things would lead to a discussion about modern ethical values, more precisely western values, which teach one to be more polite and gentle, and specifically structured like the urban people.

Additionally, Satyabati's protest against domestic violence is also a significant moment in the novel *First Promise*. Bhabini's sister gets killed because she refused to share the bed with her husband at night. And for this reason, they, her husband and mother-in-law, murder her. It was the usual behavior in those times in terms of domestic violence. Satyabati however protest against this injustice. She writes a letter to the British Administration to take legal steps so that the murderers are caught and punished. Her bold presentation on the condition of the women in Bengal is considerable in the novel. She complains to the white police man in a story language:

Just tell me why have you opened your courts of justice? In our country we used to kill our women by burning them on their husband's funeral pyre; you stopped that practice and saved us from that sin. But that's nothing! There are heaps of sins that have collected over centuries. If you can rid us of those, only then would I say that you deserve to be lawmakers. Why have you taken on the guise of a ruler in another's land? Why can't you just huddle into your ships and leave? (Debi, 484)

This incident focuses on her courage to accept the changes in the society and challenge the unusual and superstitious beliefs in the society. Her protest against the incident inspires the readers to conceive an idea of freedom that assured for women and by women in the time of 20th century. For instance, And more specifically she gets the inspiration and chances to raise

her voice because she is living in the city. So for her development city holds a big place in her life. She becomes influenced by the incident of Puti, sister of Bhabini which leads to a resolution of her own. Her action to write a letter of complaint and have a conversation with the white police man suggests her transformation in city. She becomes a symbol of liberal knowledge conveyer in her house who tries to bring the change and justice in her surroundings. Her action is criticized but allows the reader to conceive her emancipation as a woman in the society.

Debi's novel narrates the changes in the society. She focuses the attention on the protagonists who are dealing with the transformation of Bengal from tradition to modernity. She writes her novels in a way that exemplify the main issues of modernization. Such as, widow marriage and the condition of widow in Bengal. Through Satyabati's story she shows the different pictures of widow. She compares the condition of widow in Satyabati's house with the condition of Dutta family's widow in Kolkata. In Satyabati's paternal house, Mokshada, Satyabati'spishi- thakurma, represents the traditional widowhood. She maintains all the customs and rituals of traditional Hindu belief. However, in Duttabari⁵, boro ma⁶ is a widow who still wears a colorful sari and gold jewelry. Such a practice is quite impossible in Satyabati's house in the village however it is possible in Kolkata, in a new and advanced life of Satyabati.

The transformation of religious belief is quite marked in urban life than in the village. The struggle of Iswar Chandra Viddiyasagar regarding widow remarriage's can only be seen in the context of urban life. Thus, when Suhas's mother comes to Satyabati for shelter, she gives it willingly and also helps in changing her conditions. Similarly, in *Subarnalata*,

⁵ Bari means house.

⁶Boro ma means an elder female member of the family.

Subarnalata's niece Mallika has a second marriage after being a widow. It is a great change in the life of Subarnalata's in laws' house. Mallika's uncle- in- law takes the decision to arrange the remarriage. He is not a follower of Brahmo Society but makes the arrangement of a widow marriage;

...that Mallika, who becomes a widow at the age of 19 and had a miserable life as widow, gets married. Her own uncle in law gives the marriage even he is not the follower of Brahmo Society (translated from Subarnalata, 349).

Mallika's remarriage is a significant step to move ahead the modernity in terms of social changes. Mallika's family was religiously very conservative. So for them widow marriage is a very new idea.

Urbanization also plays a vital role on the changing of family pattern. In village and also in past people used to live in a joint family. In Subarnalata's story migration to urban life has a great place to cover. Her individual decision makes everything in a different way. As a result, by moving in the urban city Satyabati leaves behind her in laws' house and made her own home in city. This indicates the breakdown of joint families and the emergence of nuclear families. Satyabati's migration from Baruipur to Kolkata leads a debate about the changing process of Bengal.

It creates the debate in between right and wrong which merely conclude any conclusion on right or wrong. Her migration asks the question about this right or wrong. Her intention to move to city was good but nobody, such as her father- in -law, mother- in- law were never took it easily. They always blamed her for their son's separation. So the incident never reaches to a specific answer on what is right or what is wrong. On the other hand, city life

measures different types of life that hold the transition from traditional to modernity in the life of Satyabati. She gets new life styles, particularly independent life style, which is different from her village. She educates her sons that give a new dimension in her life. Moreover, she teaches women school that is different from her village life. These achievements of Satyabati are indicating the changing pattern of lifestyles, norms and beliefs, in comparison between village life and urban life style. It shows the advancement and also the transition of people's life in Bengal.

Kolkata, which is the heart of knowledge for Bengali people, creates opportunity for people in terms of education, profession and society. It decreased the discrimination and religious restriction of the people. People who were completely devoted to their religious norms and beliefs try to endure themselves in the mass to be the part of advancement. As GhulamMurshid points out,

Until the beginning of the 19th century there was a tradition to hold the norms of *Kulbritti*⁷. However, 50/ 60 years after the British rule in Bengal, particularly in Kolkata, people saw a transformation. People left behind their religious narrowness, *Kulbritti*, and started to work in various sectors. For example, the Brahmin took up the work of the Shudra⁸. And the Kayesthos⁹ did the Brahmin's work. And this social awareness and the changes can be seen in terms of changing the social status. The reason behind this is the development of a close relationship between social status and *Kulbritti*" (translated from *HajarBachhorer Bangla Samskriti* by GhulamMurshid, 151).

Additionally, the development of institutional professions also constituted with the process of modernization in Bengal. Nabakumar, husband of Satyabati gets a government job in Kolkata

⁷Kulbritti means of following the caste system. For example, a Brahmin should follow his ancestral profession.

⁸Shudra is the lowest in the Hindu caste system. They mostly do the lower tasks like cleaning toilet etc.

⁹Kayestho is the number two caste of Hindu caste system.

and his friend Nitai gets a job in a private company. Bengal saw the major changes from the establishment of industries in the creation of opportunities for the people of Bengal. These opportunities brought the radical transformation in the society of Bengal. People like Nabakumar or Nitai who used to live in the village and do nothing except living on their fathers' income get involved in various sectors of jobs in the urban city Kolkata. They become dependent on their self and become separated from their joint family.

Similarly, in *Subarnalata* the brother- in- laws of Subarnalata work in different professions. Her elder brother in law works in a British merchandise office. He gets promotion as well as all other government benefits. The second brother- in- law is a lawyer, which profession was very new to them. And finally, the youngest brother- in- law used to work in the theatre which points to the cultural development in the middle class families of Bengal. In another story, one of the relatives of Subarnalata is a police man. In all these stories the urban environment helps to build a structured and institutional setting that shows the transition from a conventional and rigid society to a modern one.

In the 20th century most of the people of started to attend the educational institutions and took up professions which introduced them to the contemporary and advanced world. They left behind the conventional tasks like fishing, farming etc to have institutional jobs.

Internal migration from village to city leads to the controversy of dislocation that suggests the changes in the 20th century Bengal. Satyabati's migration from Baruipur to Kolkata and Subarnalata's shifting from her in laws' house to her own house in Kolkata echo the discourse of disruption and throws the families with confusion. This dislocation helps both of them to come out of the restrictive confines of tradition but at the same time it indicates the loss of community ties.

Moreover, Subarnalata's dislocation after her marriage raises the question of losing her ties with her root. She gets married against her will and that leads her to disaster. She belongs to a well-educated and enlightened family but she has been married off to a culturally rigid family. This pre-empts her all possibilities to enlighten herself. She becomes the victim of child marriage and all her dreams come to an end with the marriage, although she tries to stand up leading to a deal of misery. And finally, she ends up with isolation and loneliness. She makes the place in south balcony of her house her perch. She separates herself from her family members, from the constructed world to have the purity in her inner soul. The struggle that starts from her marriage is now being a burden to her so she isolates herself and sinks into silence. Her silence represents the protest of every woman in those particular times. She becomes a typical Victorian woman but holds the identity of a modern woman who acknowledges the needs of knowledge.

Subarnalata's children however never understand her rather they constantly mock her. Her family members never recognize her attempt to enlighten her family but treat it as her madness that virtually insulted them. Her initiative to write poems and getting them published has been neglected, criticized and finally mocked by her family. Bhanu, the elder son of Subarnalata finds her efforts of writing consequence of madness, as work without discipline, because for him, a woman should be busy with household chores and should not enter in the world of knowledge. He and his younger brother Kanu compare his sisters with others and blame them that they do not have brains to learn mathematics. They believe that their brains have become dull after reading novels, poems etc. eventually, and Subarnalata moves from her in laws' house to her own house. She wants to give her children enlightenment but her attempt is criticized and neglected. However, she never ceases her effort to fulfill her obligations although; her efforts do not attain fruition. Her own sons never understand her

and like to mock her every time. In the novel both of her sons, even her husband and in laws are the representations of traditional male ethics of the Bengali society. They portray conventional patriarchal roles where man holds the ultimate power. They appear to be colonizers whose decisions are the ultimate for the family. As a result, in the final phase of Subarnalata's life she separates herself from everybody and finds her own space in her cherished south balcony. This balcony gives her the light of knowledge, the openness that builds her individuality. In the midst of the nature her values and individuality are nurtured. This is the result of urbanization her loneliness and isolation that she endures with herself. Urban life teaches her to be moderate as well as to be isolated and submissive to all.

In this case of women's liberty and cherish their individuality Virginia Woolf mentions in her book "A Room of One's Own", that

...Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (Woolf, 76).

Both of Satyabati or Subarnalata want to come out from social barriers that have made for women. They do not want to confine them only in household chores but want to learn and have their individual space where they can move easily. So the south balcony or Kashi give them a space in the nature to resolve their wishes and celebrate their senses in terms of liberalism.

Both Satyabati and Subarnalata represent a phase in the transformation of colonized Bengali society. Neither of them however finds her own place easily but sacrifices their whole life to let the people understand the importance of women's emancipation and their rights. They first against the people they love, their family, and their children and finally they become different than what are at the start of their life. For both of them living in an urban setting provide them an opportunity to be a part of the modern ethos. Reading newspaper in the house or going to the theatre with the whole family becomes only possible in those times because they are living in the city, the city of knowledge, Kolkata.

Women's liberty and political movement in Bengal towards modernity

I always compare women to matchboxes. Why? Because the way matchboxes are - even though they have enough gunpowder to set a hundred Lankas a flame, they sit around meek and innocent, in the kitchen, in the pantry, in the bedroom, here, there, anywhere - women, too, are exactly the same! (Debi, Matchbox).

Women are everywhere; hold the balance of the society. They are meek and innocent to keep the harmony in the society. In India, particularly in Bengal women have always been portrayed in this frame. Women were confined within the territory of the house and make their whole life in that particular area for social norms and values. Their psychological exploration were never been considered to explain rather they are neglected in everywhere. In the traditional society of Bengal women always seemed as the subordinate to her male partner. As Ashapurna Debi mentions in her essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality" that, "Man is the maker of that world, and woman's duty is to make him a home" (Bagchi, 19). Woman's obligation was only to make her family happy. However, this idea did not go for a long time. As Debi said, "The sleep does not last forever. Her sense of unworthiness caused her to wake up to long neglected pain" (Bagchi, 20). She also mentions about women's question on the situation of women as she said in her essay, "...those women who dared to question has made possible the emergence of the 'new woman'" (Bagchi, 20). This new woman struggled against social restrictedness and removed the obstacle to ahead the modernity in Bengal. Their struggles were not only relate them with the social context of the late 19th century but also relate the political struggle in the time of the independence of India. Beside the men, women also took part to liberate the country as per as their abilities. They associate with the nationalist movement in India to find an independent state. This movement

had a great influence on the people of Bengal. It was a kind of political phenomenon that motivated every people in Bengal to become unified in against colonial rule. In a common idea it is a policy of asserting the interests of a nation, viewed as a separate issue from the interests of other nations. It forms unity and disunity among the people as well. The phenomenon of nationalism initially emerged in the wake of Renaissance and social movement that originated in European society. It is also known as one of the foundations of modernity. The thought of nationalism and the struggle against colonial rule have a relation with the Indian modernity that indicates the liberating process of India from the colonial rule. As a result, along with the men, women were also become a part of nationalist movement.

On the other hand, Bengali nationalism deals with various problematic issues. As ParthaChatterjee mentions in his article The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,

...Indian nationalism was nothing but a scramble for sharing political power with the colonial rulers, its mass following only the successful activation of traditional patron- client relationships its internal debates the squabbles of parochial factions, its ideology a grab for xenophobia and racial exclusiveness (Chatterjee, 234).

This chapter discusses about the impact of nationalism on the society and particularly how women become a part of this movement, mostly the female protagonists in Debi's novels *The First Promise* and *Subarnalata*. These two protagonists, Satyabati and Subarnalata, are the symbol of radical transformation in Bengal. They did not participate in this movement directly. They however stayed in the home and supported the independent movement meekly.

Ashapura Debi portrays the period of national and social changes in Bengal precisely she sets “her location in the 20th century and in the post- independent India” (Chowdhury, 47). The transformation towards modernity from tradition that was occurring in Bengal is depicted in Debi’s writing. She puts the spirit of nationalism in her characters and narrates their experiences through her writing.

In first novel *The First Promise*, the protagonist, Satyabati represents the radical changes in the life of Bengal’s people. Her participation in the social reformation such as educating her children, sheltering an ostracized women and educating her daughter, complaining against the injustice to the administration and so on indicate the changes in the society. However, these incidents remark her alteration in the society and show the progression of her with the society.

Her experiences and actions positioned her as modern woman as ParthaChatterjee stats the positioning the women [particularly Bengal women] in modern world,

“...that nationalism did in fact face up to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in ‘modern’ society and that it did provide an answer to the problems in terms of its own ideological paradigm” (Chatterjee, 237).

In the time of developing the situation of Bengal women attained new positions that entitled them as modern women. However, these modern women were only confined in mimicking the western culture as Chatterjee mentions “...the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the way of a European woman or memsahib” (The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question, 240). But Satyabati represents the different kind who has a clear and own

developed view of her country and that passes through her son Saral. As Sadu-pishi¹⁰ and Saral lead the conversation:

...‘I thought, now that your mother is free, perhaps...’ [Said by Sadu]... ‘As if Ma can become free all by herself. Nobody in our country is free. India is not independent.’...Our mother says it is essential that each country should be ruled by its own people. Those who have come from another place and grown their roots here should be... [Said by Saral] (Debi, 385).

As a result, in general sense, Satyabati does not fit with the common idea of modern woman “...the westernized woman was fond of useless luxury and cared little for the well-being of the home” (Chatterjee, 240) but exercises her own ideology with the world knowledge. Satyabati becomes the paradigm of a new defined woman, who celebrates the transformation of the society and at the same time maintains the traditional qualities like.

Satyabati’s representation in the novel reminds the worthiness of a woman who is a passive participant in the revolution of India and at the same time a revolutionary in her house. Her attachment with women’s education directs this revolution in her family as well as in society.

Paradoxically, it creates the dichotomy of women’s issues as well as India itself as an independent country, because unlike the women’s question, India itself becomes a problematic issue in terms of nationalist ideology. According to Sadu, Satyabati is free and independent but Saral debates about her mother’s freedom and relates it with the freedom of the country and from his point of view nobody is free in the colonial world. Ironically, Satyabati’s freedom comes with the dislocation of her living. She leaves her husband’s house

¹⁰Pishi means aunt.

because he betrays her. She goes to live in Kashi with her father and asks the answer of her question about social rules. However, this freedom struggles with the social norms. And sarcastically this freedom comes with the isolation from her family. She leaves behind half of her life that gives her the primary understanding about life.

Debi also discusses the impacts of nationalism in her second novel *Subarnalata*, and portrays the liberalism and controversy among the members of Subarnalata's family. For example, during the *puja*¹¹ occasion, it was the duty for Probodh, husband of Subarnalata, to buy the clothes for all of the family members. These clothes are made from imported raw materials which was not acceptable in the time of nationalist movement. Their housemaid, Haridashi, gives back the clothes and says, "...o grandma, these foreign clothes are not going enter in our home. These are banned in our colony" (translated from *Subarnalata*, 104). She also says, "...if we wear these foreign made clothes, we become the enemy of the country" (translated from *Subarnalata*, 104). The wind of nationalism touches every sector of human life in Bengal and that also motivates Subarnalata to become a transition factor in her in laws' house. The reason behind her activities and thoughts is the conservative mind set of her in laws' house. They never welcomed the changes in the society or in the country. However, Haridashi's comments influence her to ask her husband about not bringing foreign clothes. She revolts against her in laws' decision and forces her husband to bring clothes that are made from local materials. She burns all these foreign clothes and inspires others to reject foreign made things. These activities are a reflection of nationalist movement particularly the movement rejecting foreign clothes in Bengal. She also goes to the local fair along with Biraj, her sister-in-law, and other members of the family and buys *swadeshi*¹² materials. As Debi

¹¹ Puja is religious festival Hindus.

¹² Swadeshi means an activist in the nationalist cause.

says, “she buys the local matches, local combs, and local soaps. She gives these to everybody and says ‘in this puja we will buy Dhakai¹³ sari’. Dhakai item is our own things” (translated from *Subarnalata*, 109). Her achievement to get along with the nationalist movement is not a big deal but reflects the progress of Bengal towards modernity. It impacts on her life that motivates her actions on women’s emancipation in Bengal.

Her wish to give a stall in the next fair indicates the winds of change in the society. The development of social political condition can be measured through institutional advancement and the advancement of women.

Debi also talks about people’s participation in the movement for liberty from the colonial rule. She says people are coming out from their houses. She particularly mentions women, as she writes,

And some of the fearless women are coming out on the street and protesting against the colonial rule. They are picketing, beaten up by police and going to jail. They are coming out by hearing a voice; only a voice and the name of the voice is ‘Gandhiji¹⁴’. The call is ‘go alone’ (translated from *Subarnalata*, 325).

Debi shows this enthusiasm through *Subarnalata*’s eyes. *Satyabati* and *Subarnalata* both see the transition in Bengal. However at the same time they become reformers in their home. Their desire to get along with world knowledge and motivating others to get involve in the process of modernization prove the changes in the society.

The nationalist movement to achieve independence leads to modernity that resolves the issues of women’s emancipation, education and profession, social reformation and so on.

¹³ Dhakai means the product of Dhaka.

¹⁴ Gandhi’s full name is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who fought against the British rule in the beginning of the 20th century. He is a prominent figure of Independence movement of India. He is the initiator of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* revolution.

Subarnalata for example never joins a protest movement publicly but holds the spirit within her. She observes her surroundings and constructs an image of liberty in her own understanding that also goes with the independent of India, particularly Bengal.

In brief, the impacts of nationalist movement in Debi's novels are echoing the transformation of a society, of a space from a very rigid system to a new and constructed one. Satyabati and Subarnalata, both show the transition in the Bengali middle class family, in Calcutta. Through them, Debi shows the possibilities of change in the society.

Conclusion

From the analysis of last three chapters I have come to a conclusion that women in colonial Bengal in the beginning of 20th century were struggled against the rigid norms of the society to make the process of developing the Bengal society from traditional to modern one. They participated in the process of modernizing Bengal through struggling and forfeiting their lives. These participations were indirect but hold a great place in the history of Bengal civilization. Ashapura Debi portrayed these passive revolutionary women in her writings as the illuminator who resolve the obstacles of the strict Hindu society during the 20th century. Both Satyabati and Subarnalata become the reformers of their time whose sole attempt make the process of developing Bengal smoother. Their struggles and contributions to the society were always being neglected and criticized however they never step back to preach the aphorism of modern knowledge.

My first chapter explores the social changes in Bengal society. It looks on the characters whose contribution makes these changes easier. We saw that both Satyabati and Subarnalata become the transitional factor of tradition to modernity. They enlighten their surroundings with modern ethics and at the same time they hold the traditional values within them. They never deny the tradition but modify it with the sense of modern world. The social reformations such as institutional education for both male and female, religious changes such as widow re-marriage, modern medicine such as Ramkali's traditional views in compare with white doctor and so on indicate the changes in Bengal society. These changes were obvious and initiated by them in their families.

Second chapter deals the modernization factor such as urbanization that gives a huge space to Satyabati and Subarnalata in changing their surroundings. In both stories urban settings give

easy space to alter the traditional views and relate this with modernity. In this urban area, Kolkata, Satyabati finds herself that shares her thought of liberating women. Similarly, Subarnalata finds an easy room to nurture her individuality that also makes the development of Bengal simpler. In both stories urban setting has the impact on the characters and their surroundings, which make their position stronger.

In my third chapter, I have tried to show women's resolution in the revolutionary movement of Bengal. I explore the notion of nationalism that helps to emancipate the women in the context of social reformation as well as political changes. The notion of having an independent state that hold by Satyabati and later passes in Saral's mind indicate the chain of transformation in Bengal society. In this chapter, I also deal with the contradictions that deal with women's condition in question of emancipating them. Besides, their psychological exploration also discussed here in terms to resolute their connection with the political movement.

Therefore, I would like to conclude this paper with the remark that women in Debi's novel tried to develop their nearby however their effort is somehow been failed in many cases. Though their revolt shows a distinctive path for the upcoming generation that a lead a way of modern Bengal. They did not confined themselves within the household space rather they elaborate themselves with the social and political changes in their life, in Bengal.

Works Cited:

- Bagchi, Jasodhara, ed. *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*. Sangam Books (India) Private Limited, 1995. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid. United States: Rutgers University Press, 1989. Print.
- Chowdhury, Indira. "Rethinking Motherhood, Reclaiming a Politics: A Reading of Ashapurna Debi's "Pratham Pratisthuti." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.44 (1998): WS47- WS52. JSTOR. Web. 5 July. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407324>>
- Dasgupta, Subrata. *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007. Print.
- Debi, Ashapurna. *The First Promise*. Trans. Indira Chowdhury. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009. Print.
- Subarnalata*. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Print.
- Matchbox*. Trans. Prasenjit Gupta. Web.
- http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/stories/ashapurna_matchbox.html
- Devi, Mahasweta, "Breast- Giver". Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in Spivak's *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York, Methuen, 1987: pp. 222-240. Print.
- Ghulam, Murshid. *Hajar Bachhorer Bangla Samskriti (Thousand Years of Bengali Culture)*. Dhaka: Abosar publisher, 2006. Print.
- Granoff, Phyllis. "Traditional Goals For Modern Women: The Paradox of Ashapurana Devi's Fiction." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20.1 (1985): 195-204. Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University. Web. 15 July. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40872746>>
- Morton, Stephen, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Roy, Bharati. "Collaboration and Protest: Women in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries in Colonial Bengal" *Women and Indian Nationalism*. Ed. LeelaKasturi&VinaMazumdar. India: Indian Association for Women's Studies. Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1994. Print.

Southard, Barbara. *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal 1921- 1936*, Bangladesh: The University Press Limited, 1996. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.