

RESEARCH BRIEF

Poverty, Women, and Dignity: Reflecting on the Writings of Ashapura Devi

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Poverty and women are two closely connected themes in developing countries. Even in households with higher levels of living, intra-household inequality in terms of resources exists considerably, leaving women worse-off. Further, women-headed households are more prone to poverty as they lack resources to pursue productive activity and biases of the society against women are at times irreconcilable, falling outside the realms of all tolerable limits. Women in low-income households, particularly, undergo a great deal of struggle for survival in comparison to their male counterparts. The gender inequality involved in consumption, health, and education leads to greater vulnerability of women in the face of poverty compared to that in prosperity. In other words, gender inequality in high-income households is of less severity than in households struggling for livelihood opportunities. More importantly, such severity does not remain confined to economic domain only; rather the social and other implications are serious. The economic vulnerability challenges the basic dignity of women, though poverty in general means deprivation for both the sexes, with bleak prospects of upward mobility over time. It is not just the “identity” that suffers. Specific to women, the immorality issue gets interwoven with economic hardships. Ashapura Devi, being one of

the most humane writers of the contemporary age, has focused on this theme in various ways with her sharp intellect, in-depth feelings, and skillful articulation. While laying considerable emphasis on women issues in general, the “poor woman” with low social status and inadequate resource base takes a special position in her work.

Ashapura Devi’s *Izzat* (Bhattacharya, 2002) is a glaring example of the vulnerability to which a woman of poor economic status is exposed. Basanti who was appointed as a maid by the couple—Sumitra and Mohitosh—for four months, wanted her young daughter to stay with Sumitra as Basanti and her daughter both were terrified by the social evils in the slum where they resided. Her other employers had not obliged her, and finding a small family as that of Sumitra and Mohitosh, Basanti was quite hopeful. Sumitra understood Basanti’s problem and tried to extend a helping hand. However, Mohitosh, as he learnt of such a possibility, rejected the proposition mercilessly, imagining unnecessarily that Basanti and her daughter might be up to bigger games of blackmailing the couple, that is, taking the fullest advantage of Sumitra’s generosity. Basanti and her daughter might put up false allegations against Mohitosh indicating that he had held up the daughter,

and, thus, could extort money.

The author has shown in the story how low economic status translates to poor social status. Basanti's daughter is exposed to humiliation in her own locality and, at the same time, she is subjected to gross insensitivity of those who are higher up in the socio-economic ladder. Sumitra and Mohitosh are in a position to help her out but Mohitosh's careless and casual attitude leaves Basanti and her daughter in pure indignity and shame. Mohitosh doubts the genuineness of the problem that Basanti and her daughter face; however, this suspicion does not arise from a genuine sense of fear of getting blackmailed by them or their neighbors. The fact that he spells out his doubts without contemplating upon the issue is testimony to this. Poverty, in his eyes, is associated with a bunch of ethical evils, which he has imagined effortlessly without even giving any benefit of the doubt. Mohitosh is only a representative of the upper class—what Mohitosh perceives is indeed what the upper class visualizes.

Even if one accepts for a moment what Mohitosh told Sumitra was absolutely possible in this uncertain world, particularly keeping in view the growing crime rates in big cities, it is still difficult to side with Mohitosh. And this is mainly because of the way he expresses himself:

“Forget those poetic sentiments!” retorted Mohitosh, heatedly. “You must act after the proper consideration. I've seen the girl. A girl like that can't remain good in such low-class surroundings” (Bhattacharya, 2002, p.52). How poverty, particularly in a woman-headed household, can take its most vulnerable form, how the lack of resources can be so conveniently equated with lack of a moral character, and how social rejection and segregation exist even in an inter-dependent social system are brought out emphatically by Ashapura Devi.

At this point let us turn to Katherine Mansfield's (1922) *A Cup of Tea*. Rosemary, a young woman of large fortune, was absolutely devoid of feelings but her greed for fame and name had driven her crazy to bring the beggar maid (Miss Smith) home. She wanted to adopt the poor girl not because she was genuinely struck by her poverty but because Rosemary thought that that would pave her way to publicity and popularity. Her husband, Philip, was absolutely aware

of her attitude and also knew the practical problems of two different social classes suddenly inter-mingling and merging to become one overnight. However, he showed immense maturity in dealing with the situation. He was determined not to give a tangible shape to his wife's not-so-genuine sentiment and, at the same time, he made sure that no one was hurt in the entire process. His tactfulness must not be interpreted here in a negative sense, rather, it was his in-depth understanding of the situation without sounding inconsiderate and rude. Ironically in *Izzat* when Sumitra says, “This means I have to tell this maidservant that I have no say in this household” Mohitosh reiterates in an inhumane way, “And what a person before whom your prestige is going to be shattered!” (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 53). Since poverty is seen to have no self-respect in the eyes of the society, since a poor has no identity, and rather a poor woman is believed to have poor moral standards as well, how does it matter if Sumitra loses her prestige in the eyes of such poor creatures? Reduction of a poor woman to something of gross insignificance is indeed a hard reality which the author has brought out so spontaneously and straightforwardly. At the same time, the author is referring to larger issues of women in general by highlighting the inability of Sumitra to do what she thought is right. Her words carry no value: how does it matter even if Sumitra had to go back on her own words! It is not just that the *izzat* (self-respect) of Basanti or her daughter is at stake in the middle of a bunch of criminals, even Sumitra does not possess any *izzat* (self-respect/status) within her own household, having an educated husband. The voiceless position of women even in educated households manifest their vulnerability: far from being empowered at some point, as the author shows, they share a common tragedy across all economic and social classes.

Basanti's daughter had questioned in her own insignificant way the social dualism and rejection, “That's enough Ma. Come away. There's no need to cry and call on Boudi. It's clear who has the last word in this house. You are not to fall at their feet, thinking of your daughter's *izzat*. The babu's don't care about the *izzat* of a low-class girl. All right. If we are low-down people, we'll have to settle for a low-down life. If we have to go to the dogs then that's what we'll do” (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 55). The egoistic attitude of

Mohitosh has, however, failed again to hear the agony of the inner spirit of a helpless poverty-struck girl. He interpreted it as a reflection of pure uncivilized attitude. Be that so, does the male-dominated society (Mohitosh) has all the monopoly right to behave arrogantly? The author has brought out skillfully the hypocrisy in Mohitosh's character. If he believes in speaking the naked truth bluntly, he must be prepared to hear with an equal magnitude of sportiveness the other side of the truth from someone else. But, unfortunately, that is not the rule of the world.

The unfavorable attitude towards poor women is not merely shown by males in the society. Even persons of their same sex are at times unduly unjust. From this point of view, Ashapura Devi (1994) has no gender bias: In the story *Tamonasher Bhramnash* (Breaking the Illusion of Tamonash), she has created Bidisha as the main target of whose verbosity is *akarmar dhari* (useless girl) addressed generously to the housemaid, Sonali Mondal, an inhabitant of a village in 24 paraganas. Bidisha's allegations and attacks under the sun are generously directed towards this little girl though Tamonash finds her the perfect housekeeper in all possible ways.

The other point which comes out very sharply in Devi's work is the domination of one woman over the other, which in an external sense may appear to be close alliances between women. These relationships are not necessarily of great affection. In spite of Tamonash's sympathy for Sonali, the latter tries to maintain a distance from him. On the other hand, she expresses her loyalty to Tamonash's wife, Bidisha notwithstanding the ill-treatment shown by Bidisha to her very often. Devi has not accepted this closeness as pure love between women, rather, she perceives a great deal of fear leading to the subjugation of one woman to another. Thus, loyalty that is being shown so conspicuously is a function of this subjugation: *Ki eta? Swajati prem? Na swajati bhiti?* What is it? Empathy of a woman for another woman? Or it is fear of one for another? (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 55). Being a lady, it requires a great deal of courage to realize this, and more importantly, to acknowledge it so explicitly as Ashapura Devi does, thus, creating a special position for herself as a purely balanced person in the feminist world.

The poor, in general, is a deprived lot. Within the poor households, the gender dimension throws up disheartening stories. For a poor woman, even enjoying the priceless beauty of nature that comes free of cost is indeed a costly affair. Other than Ashapura Devi, who else would have realized this truth bit by bit? Arati in *Patal Prabesh* (The Descent) "remained curiously untouched by the whole jolly business of spring" (Mitra, 2004, p. 36)—yes, spring, either in literal sense or figuratively. "For someone who had mastered the ingenious art of making two forlorn bits of sari endure for two whole years, was it possible to enjoy the dizzying pleasures of sixteen?" (Mitra, 2004, p. 37). However, dignity in the midst of poverty is a striking feature in the Indian context, though the cruel hands of poverty may snatch away the invaluable virtues after fixing a price for them in the crudest and poorest manner. Arati did erupt, "No, no! Why should people give us anything if we ask them everyday! Doesn't it degrade you to go begging the whole year round for things we can't buy—wanting delicacies when we can't earn a paisa ourselves? Tell my father not to keep coming home like this and blackening us with such ridicule" (Mitra, 2004, p. 39). She could perhaps refuse Ranajit's charity "shouting how she never stooped for charity" (Mitra, 2004, p. 54). But "she could almost see, through the gap in the tottering bamboo wall, a wasted body in which the ribs stuck out, a pair of hungry eyes glittering in greedy anticipation, she could see a thin and worn-out face suffused with a strange contentment—oh, what could she do but stoop!" (Mitra, 2004, p. 55).

A similar sense of dignity is present in Nishi babu's widowed daughter-in-law, Sandhya, in Devi's (1979) story *Malater Mukh* (The Face of the Cover). But for Prabhansu who was a great helping hand to the family of Nishi babu, the household possibly would have starved to death. After the death of Nishi babu, Prabhansu proposed to his daughter-in-law Sandhya for remarriage though the understanding was that Prabhansu would be marrying Nishi babu's unmarried daughter Kaveri. Anyone in Sandhya's place perhaps would have grabbed this opportunity, which comes and falls like a bag of gold in the hands of a destitute. But Sandhya is absolutely composed. Even after knowing all the details of Prabhansu's emotions and

feelings, which he claimed were always preserved for Sandhya and not for her sister-in-law Kaveri, Sandhya is completely selfless. Kaveri She only thinks for her sister-in-law Kaveri and not for her own deprived self even for a moment, which presents itself with a second opportunity to a person like Sandhya who had only witnessed darkness even before a streak of color could appear in her sky. In this sense, Ashapura Devi is a true Indian writer who could realize the vastness of the Indian woman character that shines like a precious gem even in deprivation. Not too many could actually paint this aspect of Indian virtues as Ashapura Devi does so efficiently.

Similarly, one may turn one's attention to the selflessness of an Indian mother. In Devi's (1979) *Nhisanka* (Doubtless), the old lady is in a constant strife to arrange food for her grown-up son, Noni, who moves around like a "wild-boar" without engaging himself in any remunerative occupation. Superficially, she complains against Noni to her employers but, she keeps making all efforts to feed him comfortably. Noni has come to realize his mother's enormous sacrifice and her incomparable affection for him only after her death. And even such an insensitive son like Noni bursts into tears while begging for her mother's picture from some of her mother's employers. He has not come to ask for money, or food, or clothing. His only wish is to get a copy of the picture wherein his mother appeared in a group photo during a family function of that household. On being ridiculed, he confesses with a gust of tears that he would like to worship on a daily basis the picture of his mother whom he could not understand when she was alive. At this point, Devi has certainly demonstrated her balanced approach to feminism. Usually, feminists' writings take women as a homogeneous category instead of making any distinction between woman as a mother, woman as a sister, woman as a daughter, and woman as a wife at different stages, that is, newly married wife and wife after several years of marriage and so on. Undoubtedly, Indian woman as a mother enjoys the highest dignity and respect in the world; notwithstanding the pain and agony she undergoes in other forms. And Ashapura Devi is absolutely unbiased on this point. Even a crude and uncouth son like Noni has this ability to see her mother as equal to a goddess.

On the whole, Ashapura Devi's writings, despite being women-centric and concerned about minute details within a household, expose the silent complicity of women that smoothen the reinforcement of patriarchy (Das, 2004), take a very special stand in creating characters, and describe incidents which resemble the reality in a significant way. While ingraining the element of universality in her creations, Devi breaks the monotonous and stereotyped and ushers in a genuineness of novelty.

Economic development gauged in terms of per capita income or even human development index does not necessarily mean that gender gap disappears with increased development. In fact, an inverted U-shaped relationship tends to exist between development and gender gap, suggesting that initially at least there are strong possibilities of rising gender inequality along with economic growth or development (Boserup, 1970) Hence, there is need to pursue conscious efforts for promoting gender equality and for providing protection to women who face social discrimination and are vulnerably placed in the labor market, perpetuating meager earnings. Ashapura Devi has indeed successfully harped on this issue neither with technical details nor with jargon—intelligent and focused description of incidents in simple and a layman's language sharply brings out the depth of the issues, and this offers her in the literary world an ingenious seat at incredible heights.

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