



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Voice of Resistance in Ashapura Devi's *At Sixes and Sevens*

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Abstract

Ashapura Devi, a well-known Bengali novelist, traces the evolution of a Bengali woman as an enlightened and empowered individual, struggling against the shackles of discriminatory norms imposed upon her by the society. The present paper discusses about revolt of six girls in Ashapura Devi's Novel *At Sixes and Sevens*. The revolt is not only against men but also against women. Devi identifies education as a powerful weapon to resist.

Keywords

Identity; Gender based discrimination; Education; Struggle to Revolt; Ashapura Devi; *At Sixes and Sevens*.

Indian Women Writing in English occupies an important position in Women's studies. Indian Women Writers bring out their personal experiences as well happenings through poems, novels and essays. India a country which boasts that it has rich cultural heritage and tradition also has darker sides. Many Indian Writers have written on these darker sides, but when it comes to women writers they take the credit of portraying it more realistically. Bengal is an

epicenter for literary scholars who brought fame to the land through their writings. Bengali literature is one of the oldest and richest literature in the world and occupies an important place in Indian Literature. Women writers from Bengal blossomed when Toru Dutt penned her poems. Today well known famous Indian Writers namely Mahasweta Devi, Bani Basu and Ashapura Devi hail from Bengal. My paper attempts to bring out the gender based discrimination, and suppression of women prevailing in India with reference to Ashapura Devi's novel *At Sixes and Sevens*. Ashapura Devi's novels expose the realities of Indian society, particularly of Bengal. She also brings out the injustice, oppression and anomalies.

When asked about the raw materials of her writings, Ashapura Devi answered,

I have been writing mostly about the common man. Most of them are women, the weaker section of the society. In a degenerated society women are the primary targets of exploitation. I was moved by their predicament and tried to depict it. (xv)

At Sixes and Sevens occupies a very significant place in her writing because it narrates the typical happenings of the middle-class Bengali families but it is very special when technically seen. Technically, the novel is an example to the new experimentation in fiction. It seems as if she is holding a kaleidoscope in front of the readers and turning it round and round to show the various conditions and situations the central characters are subjected to. As the viewer looks into one end, light entering the other creates a colorful pattern in kaleidoscope. Here Ashapura Devi, at the beginning of the novel creates symphony of six colours- red, blue, green, yellow, orange and the golden brown. Devi describes the colours of attires of the six girls and compares them to the flock of birds in varied shades picking up grains from the same container.

The readers very soon understand that the container indicates magazine and the six birds were Bela, Swagata, Chandrakala, Runnu, Mintu and Swapna. The difference in their dress shows the difference in their temperament. As the

novel proceeds, Devi makes a strong attack on the male writers and their writings. Among the six girls Mintu was first one to vent her anger.

Have you noticed how all the writers harp on the same theme? All of them deal with contemporary anxieties. The writers pour out all their compassion on the young men as if they are the only victims of this affliction and we girls are not at all affected by the agony of our times. (13)

Swagata added to Mintu's utterance in bold and brave manner stating that male writers does not have an iota of broadmindedness or consider women as human beings.

To them we are just a woman, a separate identity, a species different from men. If they had been conscious of our existence as human beings, at least for once, they would have voiced the agony of the girls of the present age. And when some choose to write about us, they deal only with our suffering in relation to love or torture in the hands of our husbands. As if we don't have anything else in life, more important than that. (14)

Throughout the novel, there is the voice of resistance, six different voices but unified under one umbrella term called identity. Ashapurna Devi inculcates the importance of women's education through Lily, the aunt of Mintu. Lily says that women are like footballs only to be kicked at, wherever one may be, because they lack education. She adds,

Our lot is worse than that of domestic animals. Do you know why? Because we have no education. Never neglect your studies Mintu. You must be very serious. You must do well in your exams, go up and up. You must go go higher education, because that only will enable you to line independently and become happy in life. (28)

Ashapurna Devi believes that education is a powerful weapon to revolt. Aunt Lily is an epitome of an institution called education in this novel.

Ashapura Devi uses various symbols and images to depict the prevailing gender-based discriminatory society. Water is the main symbol which is used throughout the novel and it serves as a connective element which connects the six different stories, each of the six girls craved for rejuvenation, immersing themselves in water. Oppressed by the patriarchal society, Chandrakala uses fire to symbolize anger, as she says, “Sometimes I feel like setting fire to the whole world” (14).

Another important symbol used in the novel is home. Ashapura Devi brings out the hypocrisy, dishonesty and falsity of six girl’s family members. ‘Home is prison’ remarks Chandrakala. Home is supposed to be a place of solace but for the six girls home is an intolerable and meaningless set up as the girl’s family fails to understand the torment that these six girls undergo. The image of home shatters the six girls’ dream, since all the six girls are humiliated by their own family and it serve as an obstacle to their dreams. Throughout the novel one finds that Ashapura Devi is not only revolting against men but against the society that deprives the freedom of the six girls, Bela, Swagata, Chandrakala, Runu, Mintu and Swapna. The six girls resist, fight against gender biased society, at the end Bella strangely remarks that certain things are stereotyped for men. Bella remarks:

Nobody realizes wherein our trouble lies. Because however rebellious we might feel, we cannot loiter in the streets for long, can’t be vulgar in speech, do not know how to agitate in schools and colleges. Nor can we burn trams and buses. And of course there are many more such things we cannot do (124).

The six girls passed the night without sleep. All of them were wide awake. They were waiting for a catastrophe to occur-storm, earthquake, havoc, annihilation. They waited to hear the footsteps of death. The girls tried to seek out solution for their crisis. They felt that death of any one in their family might make things better. They inevitably welcomed death so that there might be little progress or change in their life. This is evident when Mintu prayed for her

mother's death. Mintu's mother after giving birth to several girl children, wished for a boy to be born. It is only at that time, Mintu prayed for her mother's death so that things will become better.

At least one death was very much needed at the moment so that they could purify themselves in the current of a revolutionary upheaval, and make themselves anew. They longed for anything that would bring change in their lives and regenerate them. They had no faith in God, yet it was to him they prayed. (109)

There is no poetic justice in the end. The six girls cry their hearts out in a blind alley. In Ashapura Devi's vision there is no dichotomy between private and public, individual and communal, inside and outside. Instead, they are independent concepts and this explains why Ashapura Devi emphasis on the futility of sacrificing the communal in order to locate the individual. By maintaining the connection with larger self (community) she shows how individual or smaller self finds liberation.

Ashapura Devi advocates a revision of traditional community where the relations between men and women and between older and younger man are not based on the subservience of one another, but where women enjoy the same right and privileges as men in an affirmation of human values. To achieve this communal harmony Ashapura Devi wants women to break the walls of psychological imprisonment located inside them, which cannot be broken merely by going outside the walls of patriarchal homes. The community for Ashapura Devi should become the foundation that would free women by providing them the solid ground to stand firmly.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Leela, N. "Voice of Resistance in Ashapura Devi's *At Sixes and Sevens.*" *Literary Quest* 1.4 (2014): 76-81. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.