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Feminist ‘Mind Education’ Challenging Colonialism/Imperialism

Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading / Dipannita Datta. – Edition 1. Includes annexures and index, illustrated (photographs courtesy by Nupur Gupta). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, 335 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0-19-809999-4, ISBN-10: 0-19-909999-1.

PC: Do you have anything in particular to say to women?

AD: Women have plenty of things to do. They should not cry over spilt milk and be remorseful about what they could not get. Conversely, the attitude of those who head society in education and culture is not favourable in this regard. Cultural enrichment can dawn only if teachings of the West merge with Indian morality.

(p. 265, Ashapura Devi in conversation with Partha Chatterjee)

The passage above is an extract from one of the interviews that the Indian intellectual, woman writer and activist Ashapura Devi (1909–1995) had given during her long path of literary career and advocacy of women rights, humanism, and cosmopolitanism in colonial Bengal. However, deeply rooted in Indian tradition, Devi had been voicing in her prolific writing career the idea of *women’s self-sufficiency* and boosting *self-awareness through education*¹ with the acceptance of good models and practices from the West.² Showing early interest in reading (at the age of three) and writing (at the age of thirteen), Devi’s literary activism, which took mostly written form, commenced at the earliest stage of her identity development and prolifically continued whilst her writings were often dismissed as “kitchen writings”. Nowadays, Devi stands as an example of the “rise of the revolutionary feminist consciousness challenging colonialism/imperialism” (p. 84). Devi is referred to as the Indian Simone de Beauvoir, and so her *practical feminism* (p. 146), her life and poetics, and, moreover, her importance for the feminist thought in the East represent the key aspects of

Dipannita Datta's study entitled "Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading" (2015), which is to be presented and discussed here.

As the very title indicates, the 335-page study written by a researcher from the University of Calcutta, prof. Dipannita Datta, and published by Oxford University Press in 2015, focuses on a biographical reading of Ashapura Devi's extensive work and turbulent life within the feminist context in India. Reviewing a study that was published seven years ago, in this case, does not represent an anachronistic act for a couple of reasons. First of all, the availability of similar editions is very often limited with interest in translation probably not being great; secondly, the utterance of the East about itself is *per se* observed as theoretically and socially important; and thirdly, the links between Indian and Serbian literary cultures may, retrospectively, become better illuminated, having in mind the quite recent appearance (in the early 21st century) of a critical edition of Jelena J. Dimitrijević's Serbian literary travelogues from India.³

The 'Other' Ashapura

Datta's bio-critical study on Ashapura Devi is in fact an intellectual biography of a woman writer whose oeuvre amazingly numbers 240 novels, 2000 stories, 62 books for children, and other unpublished letters and essays, and whom Datta met personally for an interview in March 1992. The interpretation of Devi's life through her thoroughly neglected non-fiction writings and her concern for 'the woman's question' in (post)colonial Bengal are the focus of this study which offers a reading of "Other Ashapura" and her idea of self-sufficiency challenging colonialism and imperialism (p. 11). The bio-critical method in interpreting Devi's life and non-fiction essays reveals Devi's genuine concern for women's condition and role in the society but also places their struggle against injustice and inequality within the context of the Third World. The "Other Ashapura" underlines strongly the social critique of discrimination and rather harsh opposition towards social change in India, more precisely Bengal.

Regarding the content, the study is very well organized and structured. Besides the usual Preface, it consists of the following chapters: 1) "Critical Overview", 2) "Silences and Its Contours", 3) "The Voices of Invisibility", 4) "The Other Side of Love" and 5) "Annexures" along with the Index. Whereas the "Annexures" comprise Devi's brief life chronology, short diary notes and a list of translated works in English, the photographs and photo-excerpts from letters may be also found throughout the whole book. The study also

includes Devi's several original essays and letters in English, whereas the whole chapter "The Other Side of Love" is mainly made up of interviews with Ashapura Devi discussing the main topics that had marked her life and creative work, such as the literary work of Tagore, the importance of literature in general within society, and the necessity of social participation in the public sphere. The personal component in Devi's essays, letters, and interviews available in English provides an insight into her poetic self-awareness, the genesis of her artwork and social engagement, but also enables a direct contact between the contemporary reader and Devi's work anywhere in the world.⁴ The essays are incorporated into the section "The Voices of Invisibility" with very indicative, self-explaining titles as follows:

- "Society and the Role of Women" (1962)
- "Present Education System and Women's Self-sufficiency" (1962)
- "Girls of Kolkata – Then and Now" (1982)
- "Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems" (1988)
- "Women in the Service of Humanity" (1992)

In essence, placing women as pillars of the home and therefore of the society/nation, Devi expresses a specific understanding of women's essential nature to be nurtured in a deviated gendered nature of reality. For Devi, the uniqueness of Indian feminism, compared to Western feminism, represents its continuous provocative dialogue and its bond to the anti-colonial struggle even in the pre-independence days. This challenging nature of Indian feminism, as the author of the study explains, was noticeable in the struggles of the middle class and was supported by 'our men', the leaders of the Indian National Congress: the inclusivity in approach appears to be the distinguishing parameter of Indian feminism, now and then (p. 3). The latter is important for Ashapura Devi's notion of Indian feminism as developed in her writings and carefully elaborated by Datta in the chapter "Critical Overview".

Feminism is Pragmatism: Self-Sufficiency and Solidarity in Dialogue with History

Devi's challenge to the gendered nature of the Indian society/reality and her support for the inclusive approach in the struggle against imperialism represent the crucial idea of her understanding of Indian feminism – *the solidarity of the discriminated-against*. The ones who are subordinated should consolidate their power, wake up their minds and head towards *self-*

sufficiency, i.e., self-affirmation, certification of the role of identity and humanity, in terms of women's rights, "the emancipation of the self from the narrow confines of self-interest" (p. 9). As Devi noticed it, in Indian society "[...] women often stand in the way of other women's development" (p. 4). Therefore, with the first step of raising awareness of self-sufficiency, the consolidated female power is not directed against the male sex but against impediments to development in all social spheres, primarily education. Ignorance is identified in Devi's writings as one of the crucial enemies of progress in Indian society and, consequently, joining forces seems to be decisive when it comes to emancipatory practices.

Nevertheless, as Ashapura Devi is herself deeply immersed in tradition, she insists that the past should not be neglected and that, therefore, its co-existence should be read within the progress agenda. Devi's avantgarde insights stand against the reinforcement of patriarchy (p. 84). Despite the traditional culture that kept women invisible, Ashapura surpassed her own barriers, indicating possibilities related to being a woman in Bengal, as female activism in India depended completely on one's social position (p. 14). Therefore, as to the implications of feminism in Indian society, beside the ideas of *self-sufficiency* and *solidarity*, Ashapura insists on *the historical constitution of selfhood* – as feminism paved its way in India by virtue of anti-colonial nationalism (p. 32). This implication is rather strong, and Datta proves it by a factual statement denoting that the involvement of women in leadership positions in the Indian struggle for independence was higher than in Russian or Chinese revolutionary movements and, moreover, that the Congress party in India had had women presidents fifty years earlier than any major British political party (p. 33).

In the context of the previously said, the idea of the author of the study is that the apologia for reading Ashapura has the prevailing intention to "re-examine the tensions that run within the concealed dialectic of traditional historiography and restore conflict and ambiguity of the historical process" (p. 9). In that sense, *feminism is pragmatism* for Ashapura if it considers enhancing life conditions. Datta clearly states that Indian feminism was born in historical contexts of 'material and ideological changes that affected women'" (p35). Having an impact on the feminist and social philosophy in general, Ashapura Devi's idea of feminism as pragmatism was implemented through her extensive writing and production. 'Giving voices' to women in her writings was a kind of 'silent resistance' in terms of Gandhian enlightenment building up an ideology of an autonomous woman.

The Contours of Silence vs. Voices of Invisibility

Ashapura Devi, as presented by Datta, seems to be reconciling the binaries in her work and life philosophy, private and public, visible and invisible, women and men. The public sphere (*bahir*) intended to challenge the idea that hegemony is reserved for men. On the other hand, the private sphere (*ghar*) belongs fully to women, the nurturers of the traditional national culture, warmth of home and spiritual qualities. In a certain sense, having in mind the Indian philosophy, mythology (female divinities) and India's clear aspect of matrilineal societies,⁵ the feminine is equated with the earth, the body of the country, anthropologically taken.⁶ Bengali women, considered as "repositories of the 'home'", have taken the responsibility of nurturing the spiritual aspect of the national culture: within this context, the home was treated as the 'nation' in its embryonic form (p. 21). Therefore, their resistance might be 'silent', but their role seems largely important for humanity. Ashapura's feminism is deeply charged with both traditional and national elements on the one hand, and with humanist philosophy on the other. This strong nationalist-oriented attitude Ashapura owes to her mother who was her main role model; however, as, obviously, an intelligent child, Ashapura knew how to reconsider things in their wider context. Ashapura's rich life experience influenced her writing to a great extent, even in her self-poetics: such as distinguishing between *the social* (or public) and *private truth* unwilling to accept autobiography as possible (p. 91).

The social truth and private truth have no gender for Devi. Therefore, Ashapura pursues in her literary feminist essays the idea of androgyny but, moreover, insists on a better education system, economic independence, female solidarity, and, most importantly, clear expression of all these demands. In any case, Ashapura was literary gifted to voice all the 'invisibilities', i.e., silenced wishes and demands, in front of the rotten system and colonial modernity. Voicing the urge for a *better society, justice and harmony* was Devi's task and then harmonizing it with Bengali sensibility. Ashapura's 'practical feminism' arose from her analysis of an Indian woman (starting with her mother) and then from deeming Indian womanhood/femininity affected through the process of reinventing tradition which implied not distancing too much from the home/household. Her 'negotiations' between the traditional and modern colonial aspects were overburdened with gender complexities (p. 146). However, as Datta concludes, Ashapura's contribution to the awakening of consciousness and to the struggles against the system's participation in the public sphere is rather *cosmopolitan* within the context of feminist philosophy. In this context, Datta concludes that Indian feminism is "not a direct offshoot of feminism in the West" (p. 145). However, when it comes to liberal attitude and, moreover, the phenomenological analysis of the concrete reality of women's

existence, Ashapura Devi is compared to Simone de Beauvoir (p. 145). As a parallel here, just like Ashapura, Datta takes into the account the positive aspects of Western society in portraying a cosmopolitan feminist rooted in Indian tradition (p. 162).

Dipannita Datta's study on the life and work of Ashapura Devi, as an intellectual portrait of an Indian woman activist, can be read and explored within the feminist circles but also within the wider public, despite its academic discourse. The specificity of Datta's study is its well-composed combination of its *indirect* and *direct approach* to the topic and consequently to the reader, i.e., his/her acquaintance with Ashapura Devi's life and work through Datta's narration but also through original texts. Therefore, the study does not necessarily have to be read linearly. Moreover, the study's additional value lies in the fact that the intellectual portrait is portrayed from within but still objectively, by a scholar who herself belongs to the milieu woven by Ashapura's ideas on Indian feminism. Moreover, the study illuminates the connections between the East and feminist thought with its political and ideological background. In conclusion, the study *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading* represents an invaluable contribution to the feminist philosophy and theory within national and international confines, allowing possibilities for a spectrum of further comparative studies.

¹ The author of the study refers to 'mind education', a notion coined by Rabindranath Tagore (p. 160), as given in the title. It might be worth underlining that Tagore had two lectures at the University of Belgrade in 1926; therefore, the Serbian cultural links to Bengali culture and literature have their own history.

Also see: Dipannita Datta's paper "Translating Tagore in Serbia: Certain Inter-Cultural Perspectives (An Introduction)" via the following link: doi.org/10.2478/philologia-2016-14-13_14-10 [accessed 25. 7. 2022].

Beside Tagore's visit to Belgrade at the beginning of the previous century, the influence which Indian culture had in Serbia might be found in romantic literature coming from the West as the Balkans was already a fertile ground for different varieties of Orientalism, in terms of discourse. The relations between India and Serbia had been significantly reinforced during the Cold War and due to the personal friendship of Nehru and Josip Broz Tito, the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement.

² The author of the study herself refers both to the post-colonial theories/practices (for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and to the Western ones (Martha Nussbaum or "The Mill on the Floss" by George Eliot). In addition, an interesting observation on the part of the author is that the influence of Western imagery on Indian identities is in many cases perceived as an ideology evolving from biological difference.

³ Cf. Volume 2 of Jelena J. Dimitrijević's travelogue *Sedam mora i tri okeana* (2020) (*Seven Seas and Three Oceans: Travelling around the Globe*). For further information follow the link of the database *Knjiženstvo*: <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/en/works/sedam-mora-i-tri-okeana-druga-knjiga>. Dimitrijević introduces in her travelogues an Indian girl Devika, resonating as Devi (Ashapura). The surname Devi in translation means 'goddess', a feature Ashapura did not attribute to her personality, as Datta notices in the study.

The similarity that Jelena J. Dimitrijević finds between the Bengali language and 'our language' (South Slavic) can be highlighted by the following extract from Volume 2 of her travelogue:

"И прочита ми једну песму на бенгалском језику. Мени је било веома пријатно да га слушам, колико што је његов младићи готово детињи глас звонио као неко од многобројних металних малих звона на њиним храмовима, толико што ми бенгалски језик као и индустански некад по нагласку много личи на наш језик, како се говори у Македонији" (Dimitrijević 2020: 154).

“And he read me a poem in Bengali. It was very pleasant for me to listen to him – on the one hand, because his young, almost childlike voice rang like one of the many small metal bells on their temples, and on the other because Bengali, just like Hindustani, sometimes resembles our language in accent, as it is spoken in Macedonia” (Dimitrijević 2020: 154). Translated by M. B.

Also see: Višnja Krstić’s Serbian review of the first volume of Jelena J. Dimitrijević’ travelogue *Sedam mora i tri okeana* (2016): <http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/sr/casopisi/2017/prikazi/tragom-istocnih-civilizacija> [25.7.2022]; Marija Bulatović’s Serbian review of Jelena J. Dimitrijević’s book *Pisma iz Indije* (2017) [*Letters from India*], which is separately published and where Dimitrijević herself refers to India as her ‘Mother’: <http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/sr/casopisi/2017/prikazi/majka-indija-jelene-dimitrijevic> [accessed 25. 7. 2022]; M. Bulatović and V. Krstić, “Fairy Whisperer's March to the East”, *Aspasia*, Vol 12, Issue 1, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2019.130113> [accessed 25. 7. 2022], a book review essay on the first volume of Jelena Dimitrijević’s travelogue and *Letters from India* in English.

⁴ As demonstrated in the study, Devi did not speak any other language apart from her own Bengali. However, considering her cosmopolitan attitude and thinking, the limits of her language were obviously not the limits of her world.

⁵ See also a BBC article “Meghalaya, India: Where women rule, and men are suffragettes” (2012): <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16592633> [accessed 25. 7. 2022].

⁶ It is no surprising that the Serbian author Jelena J. Dimitrijević refers to India as a “Mother”. In comparison, an interesting fact is that in May 2022, the Madras High Court granted Mother Nature the status of a ‘living being’ with rights and duties, therefore institutionalizing a discourse which implies a feminist imagery in Ashapura Devi’s connotation. See: indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/madras-high-court-grants-mother-nature-living-being-status-with-rights-and-duties-7895543/ [accessed 25. 7. 2022].

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**Феминистичко „образовање ума“ као изазов колонијализму и
империјализму**