

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Indian Woman at Cross Roads: Feminist Reading of Ashapura Devi's  
*The Distant Window***

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**Abstract**

Feminism is the change in the existing power structure in society, which permeates all areas of life: family, education, economy, culture, and politics. It is the resistance to ubiquitous patriarchy. It is not just a single movement but a cluster of movements for women's rights like the suffragette movement in Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the movement against economic and social bias in the 1960s, and the reaction against caste and social discrimination in the 1980s and 90s. Earlier, feminism as a movement was West-centric and was limited to Anglo-American-French bourgeoisie society; later, its scope extended to third-world countries like Africa and India. The idea of feminism now took into account the long history of the movement for women's rights in other socio-cultural contexts like the anti-patriarchal activism of Tarabai Shinde, Begum Rokeya, Pandita Ramabai, and Savitribai Phule. Ashapura Devi gazed into the heart of the domestic life of the Indian woman. She examined the imprisonment of the women within their homes and their responses to the power play, pressures, and hypocrisies beneath the surface of the apparent solidity of the middle-class urban family. This paper explores the resistance to patriarchy through the novel *The Distant Window*. The two female protagonists of the novel, Parvati and Romola, have defied against male hegemonic onslaught in the book. Parvati's humble background forced her to compromise in matrimonial alliance till a certain point until she broke up with her husband, unlike Romola, who, for the sake of her identity, the woman position, discarded the marital life and preferred to stay single. The patriarchy did not easily accept their defiance of societal norms and practices as society exerted pressure to unite them.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, hegemony, identity

India did not have any systematic women's rights movement like the West. The sole aim of all the Indian intellectuals and activists during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was to get freedom and they were systematically engaged with it. However, India has not been dumbing about the oppression of women. It has always been voiced through different forms, forums, movements, or activities. The long history of movements for women's rights that took place in India includes the anti-patriarchal movement of Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) and her alleged attack on Hindu scripture as a source of women's oppression. Her activism is based on the life of a Hindu widow who is deprived of remarriage rights making her socially ostracized. Begum Rokeya, a prominent Bengali thinker, educator, teacher, professor, women empowerment, and political activist, worked for Muslim girls in East Bengal. She advocated for men and women to be treated equally as rational beings, noting that the lack of education for women was responsible for their inferior economic position. Similarly, Sabitribai Phule was another women's rights activist who, with her husband, opened schools for the unprivileged, deprived, and underdogs.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

In this scenario, one of the writers who raised the voice of women in novels, breaking the shackles of patriarchy, is Ashapura Devi. Ashapura Devi (1909-1995) is the first woman writer to win Jnanapith. She is one of the few women writers who came out of the confinement of domesticity and became a voice for women. She falls in the group of Indian women writers like Swarna Kumari Devi (1855-1932), Sarat Kumari Ray Chowdhury (1861-1920), Anurupa Devi (1882-1958), Nirupama Devi (1833-1951), Sailabala Ghosh (1894-1974) and Jyotirmayee Devi (1894-1989). In her life, Ashapura became a cult figure who voiced for the ordinary Bengali women and Indian women at large. *The Distant Window* is an outpouring of Ashapura Devi's keen observation of Indian life. It is highly realistic.

*The Distant Window* is dominated by two female characters: Parvati and Romola. The feminism they reflect is unique and distinct. Parvati is instinctively active, sportive, and an optimistic young wife of an old husband, a man who is her father's friend. She stands as a lady of sympathy, fellow-feeling, and duty-bound. As her father could not repay the debt, he had to give his daughter in return. The matter is sensitive. However, strangely, Parvati accepted the proposal to be the wife of that old tyrannical man, Nandolal Rout. She also tolerates mood shifts and tortures of Nando. Nando is a man of the meanest kind, always trying to serve the officers like anything. He wants to show himself more faithful than a pet dog. He is a drunkard. He comes home late at night often drinking heavily. He makes Parvati serve the sahibs and memsahibs, those who stay in the nearby dak-bungalow. Although it is against her will, she only works as an allegiance to Nando. Nando, in turn, of Parvati's service, gets a good deal of tips. She is childless too. Even then, she supports Nando very much and silences the critiques by saying: "Why? What is wrong? He may be older, but he works hard. Does not he earn well? He earns double the amount a younger man would. He frequently works overtime. I am thrilled as I am." (Devi 23)

She has adapted herself in every possible way to be with Nando. She has rendered her young womanly dignity to serve the sahibs and Memsahib. At times, she tries to persuade them to make the right decisions as she has done with Mr. Manas Mukherjee. Nando doubts her variously. But she has proved her purity and has saved her individuality. When the Sahibs ask her identification in terms of her husband, she dislikes it: "Suddenly Parvati felt her temper soaring high. Why not her name? Was she nobody that her name becomes superfluous? Why did not he want to know her name?" (p.135)

Parvati has an impressive virtue that has impressed the Sahib. Although the Sahib is nothing to her, she has dissuaded him from eating meat brought by Dasarath because he brings rat meat in the name of mutton. Over time, she has dreamt of a better life with Nando. But jealous and mean Nando has never allowed her to make her dream come true. Her self-styled contentment results in chaos. Nando thinks that she has an illicit relationship with the recently arrived sahib. This is why he starts falling out with her very often. He has beaten her black and blue. He has promised to kill the sahib named Manas Mukherjee.

The next day a dramatic change takes place. When both Sahib and Nando are on duty to survey and apprehend Nando's threat, Parvati arrives at the spot like a completely abnormal woman. She argued with her husband and received a thorough beating. She then seeks the help of the Sahib to go to Calcutta for her survival. She says that she would rather work as a maidservant but she would never stay with such a fellow. The Sahib is put into trouble. He thinks that "in his country, every day thousands of wives live with their

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

husbands who beat them, ... treat them like chattels, and still they continue to accept the situation without any protest, overwhelmed him. He felt utterly confused.” (178)

The next moment, Parvati's life seems to be changing a little. Now, she is a lady servant of Romola at Calcutta. But it is such a coincidence that Romola happens to be the wife of her Sahib, Manas Mukherjee, whom Parvati already knows well. Still, it takes her time to confirm the relationship between Sahib and Romola. Romola also tries to forget her past life much like Parvati. She tries to become passive. Parvati persuades Romola to accept the conjugal life again. Romola also knows that Parvati is married and her husband is present somewhere. But when Romola inquires about her family discord, Parvati explains that she does not want to stay with a man as a servant. She has the feminine ability to provide for herself. So she says, “If I have to slave, then why should I slave without any return in terms of money? Why should not I work for salary? Why should I live with a despicable man and get beaten up?” (195)

Days pass. The same Parvati accepts her family life again. The same old man, Nando, arrives there in a sheer desperate condition. In the meantime, Parvati has thought about Nando's condition again and again. She has thought of the rice and jaggery at her home, “She has tried to despise that man, but failed. Rather the attitude of despise boomeranged to herself.” (202-203) She has also spent many sleepless nights at Romola's home thinking of her husband. When Parvati finds Nando in such a condition, her generosity knows no bounds. Her true feminine spirit comes out with no time. She becomes ready to leave Romola's home with the same old and weak man who has spoiled her life. What a strange personality Parvati bears. Is not it a true sacrifice of the true self of the female one? She does not talk more with her mistress when she finds Nando. Nando is more important for her. Whatever it may be, Parvati overcomes any other common woman, showing her true feminine self.

The second character is Romola. She is a job holder, and educated lady living in Calcutta. Later, we learn that she is Manas Mukherjee's wife. Both of them are divorced owing to differences among themselves. After marriage, she accuses Manas of not giving her company. She accuses him of torturing her mentally remaining away from him. She feels as if her husband is neglecting her willingly. He happens to be irresponsible for her. He forgets his duty to her and wants her to dominate instead. This is why she is away from him. The writer comments, "Of course, Romola had the strength of character not to give in. With every passing day, she was adding solid ground to standing firmly on her own feet" (182)

She does not want the help of a man. She has rejected the help of his brother Sachin. When her mother criticizes Romola for not adapting herself with her husband, she replies sharply, "Each day, each age has its peculiarities, Ma, for me, to have to follow the husband, be compelled to give up my own thing and live only on cooking, and housekeeping, appears funny like." (198)

Again, she argues with her disappointed mother, saying, “The wives have always given more importance to the family and home than to their husband. Now they hold different values.” (198); therefore, she accepts such a life. She thinks that husband and wife should be committed to each other. They should stay together, or there is no meaning in accepting somebody as a husband. Romola is rude to her husband for some reason. She has spent many sleepless nights but for him. Her husband has deserted her years together, not giving her company. So she thought that her marital life would be meaningless in such a way. So, she decides

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

to stand on her own. She asks herself, "Does not a woman have the right to live as she chooses? Why not? Certainly she has a right. But she has to pay for that right." (201). Romola is a dynamic, revolutionary, and independent-minded. She accepts desolation from her life partner for this. She has a reason behind this for many such women in our society. At the closure of the novel, reunion for Romola becomes like a distant window, and she prefers to stay separated.

Ashapura's concept of woman has a curious contradiction. In her novels, the woman's position is at a crossroads, unsure of the path she has to follow. It is because of her understanding of the Hindu way of life. On one hand, she has repeatedly asserted her faith in marriage as an institution and family as a source of woman's stability and security as the ground under her feet and roof over her head; on the other, she has to raise her voice against domestic violence, suppression and inhibition being sanctioned to women. In her perception and experience, a perpetual opposition exists between women as an individual versus the Hindu society where she lives. For her heroines, the Hindu society, instead of giving shelter to women, becomes a quagmire that sucks, and the roof appears too low for her to grow as a human being.

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