

Reflections of Feminism in the Literary Works of Zhao Shuli and Ashapurna Devi

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Introduction:

Zhao Shuli and Ashapurna Devi hold important positions in Chinese and Indian literature respectively.

Zhao Shuli (赵树理 1906–1970) was born on September 24, 1906, in Yuchi Village, Qinshui County, Shanxi Province, China into a poor peasant family. From a young age, he worked on farms, which gave him first-hand experience of rural hardship and village life. This background strongly influenced his writing. He was an important Chinese writer and a major figure in modern Chinese literature. He is best known for his realistic depiction of peasant life and socialist change in North China, with a strong focus on the struggles of women. Zhao Shuli wrote stories closely followed Mao Zedong's ideas about literature serving society and the masses.

Zhao Shuli began writing with the aim of representing rural people in a language they could easily understand. He used everyday speech, local dialects, and traditional storytelling methods. His writing style avoided elite literary language and focused instead on realism and social education.

His important works include: "Marriage of Xiao Erhei" (小二黑结婚), "The Rhymes of Li Youcai" (李有才板话), "Changes in Li Village" (李家庄的变迁), "Sanliwan" (三里湾), "Registration" (登记) "Rise of Meng Xiangying" (孟祥英翻身) and Heirloom" (传家宝) etc. The major themes in Zhao Shuli's works are resistance to feudal traditions and superstition, the social and economic transformation of rural China, the popularization of literature through national and folk forms, and the emancipation of women under the new socialist system. Zhao Shuli was regarded as a "People's Artist" and a model writer under Maoist literary policy. His works focus on peasants becoming aware of their rights and embracing socialist ideas. Through simple language and realistic stories, Zhao aimed to educate and inspire ordinary people during a time of major social change.

Ashapurna Devi (আশাপূর্ণা দেবী 1909–1995) was an important Bengali novelist and poet who reshaped twentieth-century literature by focusing on the lives and struggles of middle-class women living under patriarchy. Although she had no formal education, she wrote more than 240 novels, around 1,000 short stories, and many children's books. She received India's highest literary honour, the Jnanpith Award, in 1976 for her famous trilogy Pratham Pratishruti (প্রথম প্রতিশ্রুতি), Subarnalata (সুবর্ণলতা), and Bakul Katha (বকুলকথা).

Ashapurna Devi was born on January 8, 1909, in North Kolkata, into a conservative Baidya family. Because of strict social customs, Ashapurna Devi was not allowed to attend school. She educated herself by listening to her brothers' lessons and reading at home.

Ashapurna Devi's writing strongly questioned patriarchal values and social traditions. She focused on the restricted and often painful lives of women in traditional middle-class households. Her stories reveal how women are controlled through customs, marriage, and family expectations. Her most important work is the trilogy Pratham Pratishruti (1964), Subarnalata (1967), and Bakul Katha (1974). Through these novels,

Ashapurna Devi traces the struggles of three generations of women as they seek education, independence, and self-respect. The trilogy presents women's resistance as a slow, difficult, but deeply meaningful journey toward freedom.

This article presents a comparative study of the literary works of Ashapurna Devi and Zhao Shuli from a feminist perspective. Although the two writers belonged to different countries and wrote in different cultural and historical contexts, both focused on the lives of women in patriarchal societies. Their works portray the challenges women face in their families and communities and highlight their struggle for dignity, equality, and independence.

The study examines how both writers represent women's experiences of oppression, resistance, and social change. It also explores the similarities and differences in their feminist ideas and literary approaches. By comparing selected works of Ashapurna Devi and Zhao Shuli, the article shows how each writer reflects the realities of women's lives while offering a distinct vision of women's emancipation in India and China.

Feminist Perspectives in the Writings: Similarities and Differences:

Even though they wrote for different audiences, both writers were deeply committed to realism. Their characters are not heroic figures but ordinary people facing rigid social systems. In Zhao Shuli's stories, people struggle with class and land relations in villages, while in Ashapurna Devi's works, women struggle with gender roles, family honour, and social expectations. Both writers use ordinary life to expose larger systems of power and show that the family is not a safe private space, but a place where social control is strongest.

These two writers had different Socio-Political Background in their career as writer, while Zhao Shuli's writing developed during the Chinese Communist Revolution, for Zhao Shuli, literature was closely connected with political education. His stories were meant to teach peasants how to move from old feudal customs to a new socialist society. Marriage, family relations, and women's labour become important areas where traditional authority is challenged by the state.

Ashapurna Devi wrote during the late colonial and early post-colonial period in India, a time shaped by nationalism and the partition of Bengal. While nationalist ideas often praised women as symbols of tradition and purity, Ashapurna Devi showed how these ideas actually restricted women's lives. Unlike Zhao Shuli's characters, Ashapurna Devi's women do not receive support from laws or political movements. Their struggles take place inside the home and are shaped by middle-class values, social respectability, and internalized patriarchy.

The novels of Zhao Shuli and Ashapurna Devi present women's lives through their everyday experiences within the family. Both writers show that the home is not only a place of care and belonging but also a space where women face control, discrimination, and unequal treatment. Through family relationships, they explore how patriarchal values shape women's lives and limit their freedom. At the same time, they show how women question these traditions and gradually resist them. The following sections compare the major themes in the works of both writers, including marriage, life in the in-laws' house, the role of the mother-in-law, the symbolism of the threshold, physical and intellectual violence, the silent husband, and the different endings of the female protagonists.

Marriage:

Marriage plays a central role in both writers' works and reflects wider social control.

During the May Fourth Movement (1919) in China, intellectuals promoted women's liberation through education and marriage reform. These efforts aimed to end feudal practices and promote free-choice marriage and gender equality, themes clearly reflected in Zhao Shuli's stories of rural women moving from oppression to new social freedom. In Zhao Shuli's story "Registration" and "Marriage of Xiao Erhei", marriage becomes a space where new socialist laws challenge old feudal traditions. Registering a marriage without parental consent is shown as a powerful feminist act. Women's freedom depends on legal protection and collective institutions. Meng Xiangying's liberation in "Rise of Meng Xiangying", becomes possible because the Communist Party and Women's Association intervene against her abusive in-laws.

Zhao Shuli repeatedly criticized the feudal patriarchal system and the outdated customs that supported it. In the traditional feudal family structure, the patriarch, most often the father, wielded absolute authority, determining the fate of all other members. Zhao Shuli observed that, despite the cultural shifts heralded by the May Fourth Movement, this ideology of patriarchal domination persisted and continued to suppress social progress. In works such as "Marriage of Xiao Erhei", "Heirloom", and "Registration", he launched sharp attacks on these authoritarian family elders, exposing them as backward figures who obstructed the aspirations of younger, progressive women. Through stories like "Registration", Zhao Shuli vividly portrayed the plight of newly married women, who were subjected to systemic oppression within their in-laws' households. Mothers-in-law, driven by selfishness and a desire for control, often mistreated their daughters-in-law, turning marriage into a source of both physical and emotional suffering. This oppression, common in many households, had become a socially accepted norm. his story "The Rise of Meng Xiangying" "expose these injustices, highlighting the deep-rooted and systematic nature of such exploitation.

In contrast, Ashapura Devi's "Pratham Pratishruti" (The First Promise) and Subarnalata show marriage as a trap rather than a reformable institution. Child marriage, denial of education, and control over women's desires are enforced through customs, shame, and emotional pressure. Satyabati's resistance does not begin with law, but with literacy and personal conscience. Marriage is shown as deeply hostile to women's independence.

Satyabati's husband was an honest and well-meaning man, but he did not have the courage to challenge deeply rooted social customs. Satyabati wanted her daughter to be married only after completing her education. In Bengali society in India that time, an unmarried adult daughter was often regarded as a source of social stigma for the family. A similar situation appears in Zhao Shuli's "Registration". Xiao Peie is eager to arrange her daughter's marriage at an early age because she fears that delaying it will damage her daughter's reputation and make it more difficult to find a suitable husband in the future. Knowing that Satyabati would never agree to an early marriage, her mother-in-law invited the granddaughter to stay with her and, taking advantage of Satyabati's absence, arranged her marriage.

In-Laws' House: Different Forms of Oppression .The Mother-in-Law as the Enforcer of Patriarchy:

Both writers clearly show that the in-laws' house is the main place where women are controlled and shaped by traditional and backward people. A strong similarity between Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi is their portrayal of mothers-in-law as key enforcers of patriarchy.

In Zhao Shuli's "The Rise of Meng Xiangying," the mother-in-law represents old feudal China. She treats Meng Xiangying as bought labor and uses physical violence to control her. Although she is also a woman, she becomes an agent of oppression by strictly enforcing feudal customs. She believes that beating and scolding a daughter-in-law shows proper authority and maintains social order. Her sharp tongue, harsh behavior, and constant monitoring of Meng Xiangying reflect her strong desire for control and fear of losing respect. In the story, Zhao Shuli writes "According to old customs, a woman is beaten and scolded when she is a daughter-in-law, but once she becomes a mother-in-law, she is expected to beat and scold her daughter-in-law to show authority. Similarly, the old belief about men and women is that a wife is like property(horse)meant to be controlled and beaten, and a man who does not beat his wife is considered afraid of her."

In this story Zhao Shuli also beautifully portrayed that her cruelty comes from fear and insecurity. She is afraid of social gossip, losing authority within the family, and political change. Her blind faith in Niu Chacha(her crooked ally) and rumors about changing regimes shows her ignorance and dependence on old power structures. She opposes her daughter-in-law Meng Xiangying becoming a cadre not out of concern, but out of fear that political change might bring trouble to her family.

As Meng Xiangying gains power through revolutionary institutions, the mother-in-law slowly loses control. She can no longer beat or scold her openly and is reduced to quiet resistance and sarcastic comments. This change highlights the decline of feudal authority and reveals the weakness of those who rely only on tradition rather than justice or reason.(example)

In Ashapura Devi's novels, mothers-in-law such as Elokeshi in "Pratham Pratishruti" act as guardians of traditional social values. Their authority is exercised not through physical violence but through emotional control, constant supervision, and moral pressure. Satyabati's struggle is especially painful because she is forced to resist women who are themselves victims of the same patriarchal system.

A similar situation appears in Zhao Shuli's story "Registration". Xiao Feie's mother-in-law not only treats her daughter-in-law harshly but also encourages her son to physically abuse his wife. Through such incidents, Zhao shows how older women can become active supporters of patriarchal oppression.

In the works of both Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi, newly married women face difficult lives in their in-laws' households. After marriage, they are expected to perform heavy domestic work while enduring unfair treatment, emotional abuse, and, in some cases, physical violence. Mothers-in-law, driven by the desire to maintain family authority and control, often become the main enforcers of these oppressive practices. Such behaviour is presented as a socially accepted part of traditional family life. This idea is clearly reflected in Zhao Shuli's "Registration" and "Heirloom", as well as Ashapura Devi's "Prothom Pratishruti" and "Subarnalata".

Both writers also explain why this system continues. The elderly mothers-in-law are unwilling to give up their authority over the younger daughters-in-law. By controlling them, they preserve their own position and power within the family. Zhao Shuli criticizes these feudal customs for denying individual freedom and preventing social and intellectual progress, while Ashapura Devi reveals how patriarchal values become deeply rooted in everyday domestic life. Together, both writers show that patriarchy is often sustained not only by men but also by women who have internalized and passed on the same oppressive traditions from one generation to the next.

The Meaning of the Threshold:

The threshold is an important symbol in the works of both Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi. It represents the boundary between the old way of life and the hope for a new one. However, the two writers use this symbol in different ways.

In Zhao Shuli's "Registration", the threshold is the door of the marriage registration office. When a young couple enters this office to register their marriage, they leave behind old customs such as arranged marriage and family control. By crossing this threshold, they choose marriage based on their own wishes and gain legal recognition from the government. It marks the beginning of a new life based on equality, freedom, and modern values. The change is not only personal but also social because the new government supports these rights.

Although Ashapura Devi does not always use the word "threshold" explicitly, it functions as a powerful symbol throughout her works. It represents the boundary between the domestic and the public spheres, obedience and freedom, and tradition and modernity.

In "Prothom Pratisruti", the threshold symbolizes the patriarchal boundary that prevents women from gaining education, freedom, and participation in public life. Satyabati's determination to cross this boundary reflects her resistance to gender discrimination and her desire for selfhood.

In Subarnalata, crossing the threshold marks a woman's entry into her husband's home and the beginning of a new phase of patriarchal control. Marriage does not free her from oppression; instead, it transfers her from the authority of her parental home to that of her husband's family. In this novel, the threshold is not only at the entrance of the house but also within the domestic space itself. Subarnalata dreams of a south-facing veranda (Balcony) where sunlight and fresh air can enter. This is more than a simple desire for comfort. The veranda symbolizes freedom, education, and a connection with the world beyond the walls of the house. Through this image, Ashapura Devi shows Subarnalata's longing to move beyond the restrictions of domestic life and to live with dignity and independence.

In "Bakul Katha", however, the meaning of the threshold begins to change. It symbolizes the gradual breaking down of patriarchal barriers. Unlike her mother and grandmother, Bakul moves beyond the limits of the domestic sphere, gains education, and develops an independent identity, suggesting the possibility of women's liberation.

Thus, the threshold has different meanings in the two writers' works. For Zhao Shuli, crossing the threshold means entering a new society where women have legal rights and greater freedom. For Ashapura Devi, the threshold shows the invisible barriers inside the home that stop women from living freely. Zhao Shuli focuses on social change, while Ashapura Devi mainly shows that real freedom is difficult to achieve as long as women remain trapped by patriarchal traditions within the family.

Violence: Physical and Intellectual:

Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi both show that women suffer because of patriarchy, but they describe different forms of violence. While Zhao mainly focuses on physical and economic violence, Ashapura Devi highlights emotional and intellectual violence. Both writers show that these forms of violence take away women's freedom and dignity.

In Zhao Shuli's stories, violence is often direct and physical. Women are beaten, forced to do hard work, and treated as if they have no value of their own. In "The Rise of Meng Xiangying" and "Registration", Meng Xiangying and Xiao Feie suffer physical abuse and is expected to work without rest. They were treated more like servants or property than as members of the family. Such violence is accepted because of old feudal customs, and husbands often remain silent instead of protecting their wives. Zhao Shuli shows that this suffering continues until society and the law begin to challenge these old traditions.

In Ashapura Devi's novels, violence is usually not physical, but it is equally painful. Women are controlled through insults, criticism, constant watching, and denial of their wishes and opinions. They are not allowed to think freely or develop their talents. In "Subarnalata", the destruction of Subarnalata's manuscript by her family is a powerful example of intellectual violence. It shows that her thoughts, creativity, and dreams have no value in the eyes of her family. She is expected to spend her life only in household work. At one point, she is even forced to "serve even the servants," showing how little respect a daughter-in-law receives in the family. Her identity as a thinking and educated woman is completely ignored.

Although the forms of violence are different, both writers make the same point. Physical violence and intellectual violence are both ways of controlling women. Zhao Shuli exposes the physical suffering caused by feudal customs, while Ashapura Devi reveals the emotional and mental suffering hidden inside the home. Together, they show that true women's liberation is possible only when both the body and the mind are free from oppression.

The Silent Husband:

In the works of both writers, the husband's silence helps to maintain women's oppression.

In Zhao Shuli's stories, husbands are weak and often confused between old traditions and new socialist ideas. Their silence is shown as a feudal habit and is openly criticized. Through political education, these men are expected to change and support their wives.

Meng Xiangying's husband in "The Rise of Meng Xiangying" and the husband in "Registration", Meini and Carpenter Zhang, represent weak rural men shaped by feudal customs. They are young, immature, and lack independent judgment. Instead of protecting their wives, they blindly obey their mothers and carry out their orders. Their violence toward their wives is not driven by personal cruelty alone, but by the belief that beating a wife proves male authority.

In Ashapura Devi's fiction, the husband, like Prabodh in Subarnalata, is often portrayed as a complex and subtle oppressor. He is usually educated, cultured, and socially respectable, yet he fails to support his wife within marriage. Instead of using his position to challenge injustice, he chooses silence and conformity.

These husbands often admire their wives privately but suppress them in public to protect social status and family reputation. They value social approval more than their wives' freedom or happiness. Their oppression is rarely physical; it is expressed through emotional neglect, control, and refusal to speak up. We can say violence or oppression in both cases is not always driven by personal cruelty, but by social conditioning. Zhao Shuli's husbands obey their mothers and old customs, while Ashapura Devi's husbands conform to social expectations and respectability. In both cases, tradition controls their actions. Both, Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi criticized and exposed the moral weakness of men. By remaining silent, these husbands become indirect oppressors. Zhao Shuli exposes the need for political education

and social reform, while Ashapura Devi highlights the emotional and ethical failure of men within marriage.

Endings: Success and Sacrifice:

The endings in the works of Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi show an important difference in their views of women's liberation.

Zhao Shuli's stories usually end with hope and positive change. In "The Rise of Meng Xiangying", Meng Xiangying begins as a victim of feudal society. She is beaten and insulted by her husband and mother-in-law. She has no support from her parents, no dowry, and is even mocked for her "big feet." She is treated as a servant rather than as a member of the family. Although she suffers greatly, Meng Xiangying is not a weak woman. She has courage, speaks against injustice, and refuses to accept unfair treatment quietly. She argues with her mother-in-law, resists her husband's violence, and even attempts suicide when she can no longer bear the oppression. These actions show her strong desire for freedom and justice.

Her life changes with the coming of the new socialist government. She joins the Women's Salvation Association, gains confidence, and becomes a respected leader in her village. She helps other women, speaks against domestic violence, and encourages social change. Zhao Shuli ends the story with hope, suggesting that women can achieve freedom when society, the law, and the government support equality.

Ashapura Devi's novels like novels written by Lu Xun, however, have more painful and tragic endings. Her women become mentally strong, but they do not receive the freedom they deserve. In "Pratham Pratishruti", Satyabati leaves her husband's house because she refuses to live without self-respect. Her decision is an act of courage, but it also means separation from her family and a life of loneliness. She wins her dignity but loses the security of her home. In "Subarnalata", the tragedy is even deeper. Subarnalata dreams of education, freedom, and a meaningful life, but her family never understands her. She spends her life performing household duties while her thoughts and talents remain unrecognized. The destruction of her manuscript symbolizes the rejection of her identity and creativity. She dies before her life story is published, showing that her voice is silenced even after a lifetime of struggle.

Through these endings, Ashapura Devi suggests that personal courage alone is not enough to defeat patriarchy. Society and the family are so deeply controlled by traditional values that women often have to sacrifice their happiness, dreams, and even their identity. Unlike Zhao Shuli, who offers hope through social and political change, Ashapura Devi presents a more realistic picture in which women's struggle continues despite their courage and determination.

Thus, the endings of the major works of the two writers reflect their different feminist visions. Zhao Shuli believes that social reform can bring women's liberation, while Ashapura Devi shows that the fight against patriarchy is long and painful. Yet both writers honour the courage of women who refuse to accept injustice and who continue to struggle for dignity and freedom.

Conclusion:

Although Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi wrote in different political, cultural, and historical contexts, both used literature as a means of challenging patriarchal authority and exposing the inequalities faced by women. Their realistic portrayal of everyday life and their use of accessible language enabled them to reach ordinary readers while questioning deeply rooted social customs and traditional gender roles.

Through their fiction, both writers demonstrate that literature can play an important role in promoting social awareness and inspiring change.

The comparative study reveals both similarities and differences in the representation of women in their works. Major female characters such as Satyabati, Subarnalata, Xiao Qin, and Ai Ai, Xiao Feie are denied formal education and are expected to follow rigid patriarchal norms. Despite these limitations, they develop a strong sense of self and resist the injustice imposed upon them. Their courage, determination, and moral strength show that education alone does not create social awareness; lived experience, critical thinking, and personal resilience can also become powerful forms of resistance. While the circumstances of these women differ, they all challenge the belief that women should remain silent and obedient within the family and society.

At the same time, the two authors present different visions of women's emancipation. Zhao Shuli's works reflect the influence of revolutionary China, where women's liberation is closely linked with national reconstruction, legal reform, and collective social action. His female characters benefit from broader political and economic changes that challenge feudal traditions and promote gender equality. In contrast, apart from "Bakulkotha", Ashapura Devi focuses primarily on the domestic sphere and the Bengali middle-class family. She argues that legal or political reforms alone cannot guarantee women's freedom unless patriarchal attitudes within the family are also transformed. Through the experiences of successive generations, she illustrates that social change is a gradual process that requires changes in values, relationships, and everyday practices.

In conclusion, the novels of Zhao Shuli and Ashapura Devi remain significant contributions to feminist and comparative literary studies. By portraying women who question tradition, resist oppression, and strive for dignity, both writers broaden the understanding of women's agency in modern Chinese and Indian literature. Their works remind readers that the struggle for women's freedom begins in everyday life, in homes, families, and communities and that lasting social progress depends on transforming both institutions and human attitudes. For this reason, their writings continue to be relevant to contemporary discussions on gender equality, social justice, and women's rights.

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