

South Asian Literature, Culture and Society

A Critical Ruminaton



ATLANTIC

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Chapter 2

Of Potent Matchboxes: Reading Women, Space, and Power in Ashapura Debi's *Wealth* ('Oishorjo')

Basudhara Roy

The name of Ashapura Debi needs no introduction to the world of Bengali letters, for in the mostly male-dominated sphere of Bengali literary writing in the early nineteenth century, she distinctly stands out as a pioneering female presence. In more than seventy-odd years of her robust literary career, spanning both colonial and post-independent times, Ashapura Debi (1909-95) published more than 300 books which included around 176 novels in addition to a large number of short stories, articles, poems, and children's books, making a mark for herself as a writer not merely by her prolificacy and the staggering bulk of her literary output, but more significantly, by the delicacy of her art, the finesse of her sensibility, and by her indefatigable literary commitment to the issues affecting women of her time. A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award and the first Indian woman to be honoured by the Jnanpith Award, Debi's works while recording considerable commercial success, have also afforded frequent comparisons with the two great doyens of Bengali literature—Sarat Chandra and Tagore, whose sensitivity and craft as fiction-writers, Debi has indubitably matched, if not excelled. However, detractors of her work, too have galored. Ashapura Debi has frequently been taken to task by critics for what are generally perceived to be the unforgivable limitations of her fictional canvas—her narrow thematic preoccupation with home, women, and middle-class