Abstract—The suppression and the numerous atrocities which women had to undergo since time immemorial need no separate addressal. The societal illustration was as if the female section of a particular society was meant to be under the clutch of the male section. However, with the advent of the different waves of feminism, things took a different turn paving the path for the females to rise up the ladder and make a mark for themselves. Today, women have made progress in leaps and bound and have surely broken the shackles to establish their own field of assertion. Considering the modern period, it can easily be said that gone are the days when women were handicapped by the patriarchal society. When we talk about something as “myth,” we refer to a vast array of ideas and thoughts which get encompassed within the term. Not only, are the basic tenets of living, well and truly considered, but also, the ramifications of the same appear to be indispensable to be neglected. Different archetypes have always proved to be of immense help in establishing a tradition. The famous short story “Draupadi” by the eminent Indian writer, Mahasweta Devi vividly uncovers the sheer deconstruction of subaltern women and depict quite a juggernaut. This paper is an attempt to uncover dethrone the established patriarchal norms and depict the structuring of a subaltern woman to be the central force. Thus, the paper also portrays the reversal of an archetypal typecast. The hypothesis that this paper argues is that there is always a gendered society which acts as a potent force. However, the paper tries its best to deconstruct the scenario and posit a so called “no-place” as the mainstream ideogram.

Keywords: Archetype, deconstruction, myth, patriarchy, tradition:

1. Introduction:

“I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society... I ask towards myself this question a thousand times: Have I done what I could have done?”


The inherent politics of the identity of an individual and the nation have always been the hot-seat when it comes to the engagement of a fruitful debate. There is always the unseen presence of a force which not only hinders the exposition of the identity of a group or an individual, for that matter, but also, at the same time, glaringly depicts the overpowering of a group by one another. In this regard, the suppression of women very easily becomes the “commonly-found” topic to be discussed because history depicts numerous instances where women have not been allowed to speak, to establish and to opine. However, this particular research paper deals with something which is very-easily something “next-level.”

“Draupadi” by the eminent Bengali short-story writer, Mahasweta Devi can very easily be considered to be a tale told amidst grotesque delineations, horrific instances and macabre series of pain and gruesome sufferings. It is a tale which surpasses every atrocity bringing meted out to women and paints a picture visualizing which makes terror run down the spine of an individual. Nevertheless, the very end of the story is what has granted the everlasting status to this gripping tale of horror and rape. The end elevates the tale to be the very resurgence of a group, in this case, a woman, who both establishes herself and her identity.

2. Feminist Criticism:

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what Feminism is: I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.”

--------Rebecca West

The above quote appears to be a perfect exposition to the very idea as to how to establish the very definition of someone as ‘feminist.’ Considering the short story, there is the advent of the question, Is Dopdi a feminist? Or Is it the situation that has made her sandwiched between her own identity and her hierarchical belonging in the society? When we talk about the very agenda of feminism as a specific literary movement, we can say that it tries to take into account the very social and psychic mechanism that constructs and perpetuates gender inequality in a particular society and bring about changes, sometimes even revolutionary ones.

Representation is one of the central concerns of the movement of feminism and this story vividly represents the emergence of
thing which very well subverts the established so called norms and other prevailing traditional boundaries. Dopdi, a subaltern woman, shatters the patriarchal unseen boundaries and posits herself as the force of authority, something which falls in line with the inherent tenets of feminism. The story also depicts how identity of an individual, irrespective of the caste and gender, is an indispensable part of the self. Judith Butler, in her famous book, Gender Trouble remarks, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 2006:34).

3. Draupadi: the “gendered victim”:

Bringing out her artistic genius, the writer, Mahasweta Devi paints a pen-picture of utter brutality and inhumanity. The story puts forward two very significant and at the same tie, subtle questions:

1. Is caste the ultimate criteria for establishing the identity of an individual?
2. Why is patriarchy taken for granted to be the dictator of a society?

Dopdi Mehjen, the protagonist of the story is a woman belonging to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. What went against her was the fact that she was a woman, first of all, and secondly, she was from the category of the subalterns. When we use the word ‘subaltern’, we generally refer to a military term of a ‘lower rank.’ For the very first time, this term was used by the Italian communist, Antonio Gramsci to refer to the plebians, the working class people.

In the words of the famous post-colonialist, Gayatri Spivak, “Dopdi is… What Draupadi — written I to the Patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of Male Power- could not be.” ----Breast Stories. 2010. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

The very power of the story lies in the fact that it deals with the body of a woman who is from the lower ranks of the society. The tale is shown to be something dislocates the very identity of the people, mainly woman, belonging from the deprived sections. One of the inherent ideas which can well and truly be inferred from the story is that the body of a girl is there out in the open only for ‘exploitation’ and ‘use.’ What this statement does it that it takes the aspect of ‘question’ out of the equation permanently. Because there is no question being asked by anyone in relation to the suppression of the woman.

The myth of the tale of Draupadi found in Mahabharata gets very well schematized in this story. Devi, giving a ‘local’ touch brings a subtle change in the name (‘Dopdi’ from ‘Draupadi’) and also deals with a location which is quite native as the backdrop of the story is the Naxalite Movement of 1967-71, the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Devi is known for her use of myth in her famous stories and in this regard Maitreya Ghatak comments, “whether it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher shares of the crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, the remain the hallmark of her fiction especially the little known, little landed struggles which are part of everyday life and don’t necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media”. (Ghatak, 2000, p.10-11)

4. Draupadi- the resurgence of archetypal myth:

Whenever there is the talk regarding any kind of mythical figure or mythical depiction, our mind gives way to the thoughts of god-like images. We fall back upon our inclinations of the mind in terms of how pre-occupied we human beings are when it comes to finding out how religiously inclined we are. But in this particular story, we don’t find anything of that sort. There is only a replica of the image of ‘Draupadi’ of Mahabharata but the replica is shown to be much stronger. She dismantles her opposition single-handedly and in a way turned upside down the so called male domination.

If we make an in-depth analysis of the story, we quite clearly can make out that the story is a blatant criticism of male dominance and also the emergence of the subaltern woman to the forefront thereby depicting the archetypal resurgence. Taking about archetypal myth or criticism, the famous critic Northrop Frye always bags the top spot. He remarks, “Literature is, by its very nature, intensely allusive: its classics or models, once recognized as such, echo and re-echo through all subsequent ages”

----- Northrop Frye (41)

Rudimentarily speaking, there is no great schema as to what an archetype is. An archetype can be anything in the form of a symbol, a picture, a distorted memory or a painting but what makes all these archetype is the fact that there is the recurring occurrence. They, in numerous literary pieces occur again and again which grant them the status of a specific prototype. In the words of M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “The term archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs of action, character types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myth, dreams, and even social rituals. Such recurrent items are usually held to be the result of elemental and universal patterns in the human psyche whose embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the attentive reader, because he or she shares the psychic archetypes expressed by the author. (23)

What makes the story stand out in the context of archetypal criticism is the fact that it subverts the general notion of both ‘woman’ and ‘deprived sections.’ A woman, in general, is
always considered to be meek, submissive, tender, unquestioning etc. but, in the story, Dopdi, not only questions the prescribed norms of the patriarchal society but also, legitimizes the aspect of identity that an individual has irrespective of any caste, creed or gender. The confronting act of Dopdi is an untold proof her resurgence as it dismantles the authoritative position of the males and establishes herself to be the key central force.

Regarding the revival of myth and the use of it, Mahasweta Devi comments,

“It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present times and following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies epic and ‘puranas’ interesting, I use them with new interpretations” (qtd in. Rohtak 166).

5. The Deconstruction of Patriarchal established norms:

Individual agency or individual identity is of vital importance for the establishment of the self of an individual. What we find in the story is but the ontological relegation of the self. The story surmounts women violence to a level beyond explanation. However, the death knell to the various prescribed norm of the patriarchal society was rammed by the “voice” of Dopdi, who, in spite of being by the military officials, stands tall and speaks up for her rights. In other words, she deconstructs the different structures made only for the oppression of the female body.

“….naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Two wounds” (43).

The above lines are a testimony to the sheer brutality being inflicted on the poor woman whose only fault was that she was a woman of a lower rank of the society. The pitiful situation of Dopdi is a result of the carnal desires of the male force which has denied her a specific voice. One of the striking difference between the ‘Draupadi’ of Mahabharata and ‘Dopdi’ of this story is that although both were victims of patriarchy in one way or the other, there end result was not same. In Mahabharata, we see Krishna rescue Draupadi whereas in this story, “Dopdi” does not have the support of any male figure but she establishes herself to be strong enough to be facing anyone in front of her which leaves the military officials “terribly afraid.”

The final structural deconstruction of the story is seen when Dopdi comes out naked after the horrific incident of being raped and she establishes herself to be a potent force in front of Senanayak, who has been shown to be the epitome of violence in the story:

“……what’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush-shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says, “There isn’t man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me come on, counter me………..” (196).

The phrases like “Are you a man” and “There isn’t man here” are clear indications of how vehemently displeased she was with the army officials that she even doesn’t consider them to be a ‘man.’ The established norms of the male-dominated society not only get shattered with the help of this very instance but also, there is the establishment of a structural authority, a new power, a potent power!

In The Story of Draupadi’s Disrobing, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan remarks,

“Sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy’s method of social control rather than pathology of sexual violence as such.” (p.102)

The literary theory of post-structuralism says that meanings are fluid in nature. There is no fixity of meaning in relation to a particular thing in this world. Whenever we look for one meaning for a particular meaning, we end up finding out another one. The story can very well be related to how the structural authority gets displaced. Initially, it is the military officials who are at the center controlling each and every activity of the story but towards the end, we find Dopdi as a symbol of potent force. She establishes herself as an authority-an authority of power, of identity and of self-establishment.

6. Conclusion:

If we delve deep into the intricacies of the story, we can infer to vivid ideas-

1. “Dopdi” by Mahasweta Devi is tale where the binary structures get dislodged from the thrones of establishment.
2. “Dopdi” by Mahasweta Devi is also a story of establishment of the self by questioning the various discursive practices of the society.

The story dethrones the established patriarchal norms to that extent that the recovery of them is beyond question. One significant finding of the research can very well be said to the reversal of role which we find in the different events of the story. The initial ‘object’ of the story gets turned or rather gets elevated to be the ‘subject’ of the story who becomes the regulator of all the events.

In the words of Gayatri Spivak,

“Dopdi is what the Draupadi who is written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text of male power could not be.”

The very act of assertion of her own self towards the end by Dopdi ends all debate of male supremacy. She is a glittering testimony to the fact that even inhuman activity like rape cannot deter her. The act proves the fact that, as Spivak said,

“‘My honor does not lie in between my legs.’” (p.109).
References: