

Deconstruction of the Patriarchy in “The Offspring”

Ms. Sheetal Nandal

Research Scholar

Deptt. of English and Foreign Languages

M.D.U, Rohtak (HR)

Email: sheetalnandal20@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In Indian social structure, gender specified roles have been stringently internalized and any deviation from them is rendered as iniquitous. The virtues of honesty, chastity and divinity are to be possessed by women. Cultural constructs present mythic characters of Draupadi, Sita and Damayanti as epitome of these virtues. Such constructs binds the feet of women. However, Indira Goswami’s Damayanti and Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi traverse the roles of famous mythic women characters and render such roles as concocted to keep women submissive. This paper with the help of the short story “The Offspring” justifies that woman is not merely a site of sexual pleasure or womb to reproduce but also possesses extreme power to strife, to win and to herald a new era.

KEYWORDS: Social Structure, Gender, Culture, Virtues, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION:

Indira Goswami, an Assamese writer, who have contributed with poems, short stories, and novels to enrich the North-Eastern literary canon and further English literary heritage. She entered the literary world as a short story writer with her two collections. Among them her short stories like Jattrra translated into English as The Journey and Sanskar translated into English as The Offspring made her a short story writer of repute. Her stories, like her novels are tinged with autobiographical colour set in rural Assam. The Journey recounts Goswami’s visit to ‘Kaziranga National Park’ situated in Assam with a colleague from Delhi University, professor Mirajkar. The story mainly deals with their halt on a tea shop while on the way back to

Gawahati airport. The terror stricken minds of both the professors due to militant outfits in that region along with the sight of predicament and utter penury of that little tea shop owner left an imprint on the minds of readers. The lives she depicted in her works seem an endless journey through dark tunnel because the poverty along with other social and religious stigmas has ripped off all kinds of exuberance from the lives of the village folk in North-Eastern regions. This theme echo much in the song hummed by the old tea shop owner in the story *The Journey* as:

This world is futile

Like drops of water

On a lotus leaf

Fate will make us

a heap of ashes...

This life, this youth

Is all a fleeting dream.

Although, her works are replete with the dejected lives but still they are extremely poetic and soft as Goswami herself states during an interview “You have to be poetic because the subject is so hard and rough. You must protect your subject like a mother protects her children. My stories are based on harsh reality, but I transform it. I turn it into literature; otherwise it would simply be a pamphlet. You must be a great artist to do that, a great artist, or people will not read it.” All these aspects of her writings reflect in her another very powerful story “*The Offspring*”. It is a fictional account of the entwined lives of Pitamber Mahajan and Damyanti. It centers on the actions of Damayanti, a woman bearing enough might to offend the cultural or social reins like Goswami’s *Giribala* in her novel “*The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*.” In ancient India, the Buddhist religion included women as disciples and treated them as equal to men, but later on, the laws prescribed for women by Manu were endorsed by puranas. The term ‘*Shree Dharma*’ and ‘*Pathi Virtha Dharma*’ referred to the code of conduct and duties for women. Manu said

that “a woman in childhood must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” The prototype of Indian women is taught to her through the lives and sufferings of mythical women characters like Savitri, Gandhari, Sita and Draupadi. The integrity of these women characters are preserved by literary artists over the generations such as the radiant female personality of Savitri as an incarnation of divine and world-mother is astutely etched by Sri Aurobindo in his epic Savitri as:

Her spirit opened to the spirit in all,
Her nature felt all nature as its own.
Apart living, within all lives she bore:
Aloof, she carried in herself the world:
Her dread was one with the great cosmic dread,
Her strength was founded on the cosmic might:
The universal Mother’s love was hers.
Against the evil at life’s afflicted roots,
Her own calamity its private sign.

Women have been clamped since long with their representations through texts, either by establishing high ideals for them or by presenting them as naïve and gullible. Judith Butler has rightly asserted in her works “Undoing Gender” and “Gender Trouble” that sex and gender are natural but internalized by repeated actions over a long period of time as well representations through various forms of discourses. However, the vehement voices of feminists in India as well as in other countries defy such acclamations with presentation of such women characters as Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi and Goswami’s Damayanti. In Mahabhartar the myth of Damayanti is shown as paragon of beauty, chastity and devotion to her husband Nala. She remained undeterred by many detractors in her communion with mighty Nala. Her firm standing on her virtues earned her fame and niche in epics like

Mahabhart. However, no such qualities are assigned by Goswami to her portrayal of Damayanti. The characters like Damayanti challenge the roles assigned to women by a prolonged and unaltered patriarchal social set up which considers woman merely a sexually attractive body and a womb just to procreate. This story depicts male chauvinism to have an offspring to carry on his legacy. It is a meticulous elucidation of various social carbuncles, which defiles the very existence of society. India is a depository of natural wealth but harnessed continuously by social evils like inequalities on the basis of caste, colour, and gender. However, literary masterpieces by employing various rhetorical devices lead towards revelations. One such attempt is made by Indira Goswami in her highly extolled short story Damayanti. This story is set in the district of Kamrup in Assam and gives a naturalistic portrayal of people turning into savages in order to identify themselves with social and religious compulsions. It unfolds with a story about a landlord in rural Assam named Pitamber Mahajan sitting in front of his house and his wife, incapacitated with rheumatism is reclining on her cot. The couple is childless which makes Pitamber a recluse as depicted in the opening lines of the story as;

Pitamber was in his early fifties. He was once a robust man, but slowly his worries had emaciated his healthy body. Folds of skin hung loose beneath his chin. He talked to others with averted eyes and a bowed head. His sight was always directed to the ground beneath his feet as if he was digging and seeking something. (Goswami-47)

Pitamber has been made to feel this deficiency by being inquired by every passerby and more often by a money monger priest Krishnakanta. His witty remarks made Pitamber even more obsessive about having an offspring. Krishnakanta whispered in Pitamber's ears, "What about another marriage, eh?" (48). However, coincidentally their eyes cast on Damayanti, a Bangara Brahmin widow of a young brahmin priest of a satra, who lived a life of dignity but his untimely death coerced Damayanti to fall for a debauched path to make her both ends meet. She has been introduced in the story as:

Her rain drenched clothes clung to her body. The colour of her skin was of the dazzling foam of boiling sugarcane juice. Though her figure was rather plump, she was immensely attractive. People said all sorts of things about her. Some even called her a prostitute. Perhaps the first Brahmin prostitute of the Satra! (48).

Krishankanta directed Pitamber's attention to Damayanti as an alternate to bear him a scion as she undergone many abortions, after having slept with many men. Pitamber, exhausted with all his futile efforts was easily enticed by Krishankanta's machinations to settle the things between Damayanti and Pitamber. Pitamber is bewitched by Damayanti's seductress looks when they both make a conversation with her; "Her blouse had stretched tight and was pulled up, revealing the white flesh which to the two men looked as tempting as the meat dressed and hung up on iron hooks in a butcher's shop!." The irony in the story is depicted through the hypocritical character of a high caste Brahmin Krishnakanta, who on the one hand despises Damayanti's eating of fish and meat despite being a Brahmin girl, as he proclaimed "This girl has brought disgrace to Bangara Brahmins. She has thrown to the winds all restraints and rituals prescribed for widows" (49). On the other hand Krishankanta compelled Damayanti to sleep with Pitamber for some monetary gains but avoids touch of Pitamber which he thought would defile his clan. After several nights of communion, Damayanti finally conceives Pitamber's heir. Pitamber was very excited as well fearful about it but Krishankanta consolidated him and said, "Like a vulture keeping vigil over a corpse, I'll guard that woman. Not only that, I'll give a strict warning to that old hag not to give any of her evil herbs and roots to Damayanti for abortion. But all this is not possible without money. I'll require lots of money" (58). Pitamber starts imagining himself with his son walking along the bank of river Dhaneshwari and fills his heart with rapture. However, all his aspirations slumped to ground when Damayanti aborted the child and buried the foetus in her backyard because she cannot carry the child of a low cast vermin. A very heart rending picture has been depicted when Pitamber lost his senses and clawed the earth frantically with frenzied energy just to touch the flesh of his lineage.

Indira Goswami tries to show that how people like Krishnakanta feigns religion for personal benefit to rob innocent and uneducated village folk. The central issue is violation of straitjacketed patriarchal structures in which women are perceived as mere sex objects for reproduction. Pitamber's wife failed to bear him a child, thus she becomes a mute creature to endure his denunciations as he remarked to her "Why are you staring at me like that? I will scoop out your eyes" (55) and referred to her as "Barren bitch" (58). This shows that women can exist in patriarchal social set up only if they comply with all the requirements of men. Pitamber shattered all kinds of decency just to have an offspring and forgets all his liabilities toward his wife. On the other hand, so called high caste Brahmin Krishnakanta seems to mould scriptures and define chastity differently for men and women. He accused Damayanti as a slut but compensated everything for few shillings. Here, the power structure seems to play an important role as how a high caste male Brahmin monitors from the top then the lost caste Mahajan but among all castes and classes women are groaning under this tyrannical social structure. However, in this story such power structure has been distorted by a character like Damayanti. At first she violates typical Brahminical codes of conduct by feeding non vegetarian food and engaging herself with Marwari merchants to earn livelihood. She lived her life on her own terms by throwing all social reins on her back. Although, her name 'Damayanti' is embodiment of virtues but in this story like Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi, questions as well as embarks upon excruciating restraints and rituals of patriarchal world. Both of them dismantle the image of being vulnerable due to possessing a female body. Draupadi is a member of a naxalite group with her husband Dulna Mehjan in a village in West-Bengal. It is a leftist group to fight against the power bearers and exploiters of tribal folk as they are devoid of even drinking water from village wells. These naxalites fight against the oppressive feudalistic nexus. Draupadi is caught by police, tormented and gang raped by police men under the official Senanayak. Blood was gushing out of her undraped body but she bulwarked her might and confronted Senanayak. She was naked as she tears the piece of cloth with her teeth which was thrown upon her and "Naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high" (Mahasweta-402). She goes closer, laughs and refuses to put on clothes and says- 'What is the use

of clothes? You can strip me but can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (402). She moves even closer and “chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed.....Come on, kounter me- come on, Kounter me-?” (402). Her anger manifests the anger of whole community against the abject and oppressing social system as; “Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid” (402). Although the mythical Draupadi of epic Mahabhartta pleaded Lord Krishna to save her from public disgrace by Dushasana but Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi disrupts this myth by standing naked in front of Senanayak and disregards those false virtues associated with female body.

CONCLUSION: Damayanti is prototype of such woman who doesn’t keep a noose of social constrains around her neck to appease the male oriented ideology. Damayanti as well as Draupadi are used as trope of iconoclastic implications. Damayanti by defying the social roles of a feeble and imbecile widow ventured out to strive against the antagonistic world. Her act of aborting the child of Pitamber signifies that woman will no longer be considered as womb but an individual. This archetypal deconstruction is the very essence of the story “The Offspring” as it opens new vistas for the women folk to excel in all domains by throwing the yoke of virulent cultural and social mores. Indira Goswami won a very high stature among contemporary literary intellectuals with her such social writings.

Works Cited:

- Aurobindo, Sri. Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust. N.p. n.d. Web. 9 Aug. 2017. <<http://savitrithepoem.com/>>.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge Classics, 2006. Print.
- Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Devi, Mahasweta. Draupadi Ed. Chakravorty Spivak. New York and London: Routledge, 1987. Print.

- Goswami, Indira. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2004. Print.
 - - -. "The Journey." Trans. M. Asaduddin. *The Power of Culture*. N.p. n.d. Web. 5 Aug. 2017. <<http://www.krachtvancultuur.nl/en/current/2008/december/journey>>.
 - - -. "The Offspring." *Selected Works of Indira Goswami*. Delhi: B.R. Corp., 1988. 47-61. Print.
- "Hinduism." *A World Religions Reader*. Third ed. Eds. Ian S. Markham with Christy Lohr. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. 31-66. Print.