

## The Journey of the 'I' in the Search for Self and Strength

*P. S. P. Ratna Manjusha, Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam, Tirupati*

*Prof. V. Nirmala, Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam, Tirupati*

### Abstract

The question of women's identity, empowerment, liberation and well-being has been lingering on like the earth in the vast universe. And the answers too have been provided in the form of financial independence and 'my body- my choice' phrase. But the real question to ponder over is, are these the actual solutions to the ceaseless atrocities perpetrated on women? Are women really independent? Are women able to shake off the shackles of patriarchy and achieve what the early feminists fought for? If so, why are women still being harassed? Why are women still being subjugated? Why are they being driven to the brink of insanity in the modern world? The main question is, who is doing this to women? With the advancing technology and progressing world, women are constantly shuttling and battling with many demons, within and out in the world. If the objective of progressiveness is to bring equality and peace, why are there more cases of hostility towards women by their kith and kin and the society alike? Is education, job and salary the right solution to achieving empowerment? The society hasn't changed in terms of expectations from women. The dogma of patriarchy has been around women like air in the early ages. Now it has upgraded itself and entered the minds of the modern women like an air borne virus. So where does the patriarchy end and what does it take the woman to embark on this journey? Visionaries like Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Mahashweta Deviforesaw the evil this parasite does to women and provided with the solution which is found in this paper.

**Key Words:** *Women, Independence, Individuality, Patriarchy*

### Introduction

Patriarchy created an inescapable net of illusions about women, men and fertility. These stereotypes veiled the very identity of women. Women were forbidden from studying, expressing their emotions and even visiting their parents after marriage. Their body is the tool

that is used to make them feel inferior. The society tied women's identities and individuality to their bodies. It was used to oppress them. They are made vulnerable. Their body is made into their weakness in history. This paper analyses two stories in which one case deals with how a woman's body is a bane for her and the other says how it is a boon – how she made herself fearless using her body.

Their image in the society and their respect were linked to their fertility. Childlessness is looked upon as a sin and a woman is not respected if she is childless. In Amrita Pritam's 'Stench of Kerosene', the protagonist Guleri dies by soaking her clothes in kerosene and burning herself when she hears of her husband's second marriage. Guleri and Manak are bereft of children even after seven years of marriage. Manak's mother decides to get her son married to another woman in the hope of an offspring. But she does not attempt to think of poor Guleri or Manak. She duly does what she has planned to do which results in Guleri's death. She does not leave any option to the poor girl except death in a society, where speaking out for themselves is a blasphemy. Girls did not have the right to question the injustice done to them. They often found different ways to die instead of standing up for themselves and their rights. If they did so they were cast out of the society. In a world where husband stood as the only identity card for a woman, living all by herself was a nightmare she dared not to see. These situations never prompted women to explore their identity as an individual in age old societies.

Nor were men allowed to live the life they wanted. Love was an alien idea to them in the past. They didn't have the guts to over – rule the orders from the sceptres of patriarchy. One of the protagonists of the story, Manak, is one such helpless man. His helplessness is depicted in the lines where he asks Guleri to stay back but stopped by his mother's orders, "*My mother ..... Manak did not finish his sentence*". Though he loves his wife, he could not oppose his mother's decrees. He is left feeble and lifeless after Guleri's departure from his world. His senses are overshadowed by his love for Guleri. Being helpless and guilty of the injustice done to her, Manak punishes himself by becoming cold and heartless. His guilt is turned into disgust for the baby which stands as representation of his inefficiency in saving his wife and marrying someone else.

There might be various reasons as to why Manak's mother accomplished this devilish task – the urge to be included in a social circle, the desire to show off her son's virility, the pride she gets in having a male legacy in her family and so on. In the process of making herself a

soldier of patriarchy, she forgets that she is a woman too. She makes herself numb to another woman's pain. She makes the sexist adage true – a woman is a woman's worst enemy.

While the above-mentioned story showcased how a woman's lack of fertility and identity made her weak, 'Dopdi' by Mahasveta Devi presents a different perspective of a woman and her strength.

Dopdi is a powerful, moving account about the titular character Dopdi and her struggles in police custody. Dopdi and her husband Dulna revolt against the upper caste when the working class are denied water. Later they are made the 'most – wanted' criminals by the police who support the aristocrats. The police kill Dulna in an encounter. Dopdi goes into hiding. When she is caught, she is made to undergo hell at the hands of police. They molest her and degrade her psychologically, "*Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn.*" But she finds strength in her spirit and stands up against the biggest odds of her life.

Strength doesn't necessarily mean physical strength. Physical strength can be fought with and won over. It is the indomitable spirit of an individual that is the hardest and scariest to face and stand up against. When such a situation arises, every cell of the body picks up strength and confidence radiate on the face scaring the opponent to death. No matter what situation or circumstances a woman is placed in, it is this spirit that helps her find out her real strength and identity. Her strong assertion of her needs and emotions never let her fade away in a social circle – be it family or the society.

Women can be happy, strong and peaceful only if they shed their inhibitions. They are truly liberated when they are emotionally independent – independent of the stereotypes imposed on them by the family and the society alike. "*What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?*" this is the question asked by Dopdi in the narrative to all the shameless men who molested her. She doesn't consider herself a victim, rather she strengthens her spirit and stands up for herself scaring the men. A victim is never actually a victim. It is the term imposed to degrade and demotivate an individual. The real strength comes out only when they accept and face the situation like Dopdi.

The two stories mentioned in this paper put forward two different perspectives on women's bodies. While Guleri did not have the guts to search for her identity, Dopdi created her own identity. Be it a modern woman or a woman from the 1960's, Women can truly shake off the shackles of patriarchy when they embrace themselves. No matter how much hostility they receive, their self confidence puts them on a high pedestal in the society someday. Ultimately,

patriarchy ends the day woman starts to believe herself, understand her worth and embarks on a journey of self-love.

### References

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