

## Protest against Fear: A Reading of Manorama Das Medhi's Short Story *Durga*

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**Abstract:** In a patriarchal society, women have been occupying a marginalized position in relation to men which leads to their oppression, suppression and an innate sense of fear within themselves; against the dominant group. In this context, we would like to analyse the protest as well as fear of three young girls in the short story 'Durga' written by Manorama Das Medhi.

**Keywords:** Protest, oppression, chastisement, transformation.

*... we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women.* (Beauvoir 13).

For aeons, with an utmost seriousness and single-minded devotion, the 'human females' (as Simone de Beauvoir terms it) have been instructed, taught and exhorted to behave and act like a 'woman', to think (or rather, not think at all) like a 'woman' or in short, to 'be' a 'woman'. In fact, since birth, a 'human female' is culturally and ideologically brainwashed into believing in the idea of being a 'woman'. As Beauvoir had years ago stated: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (295). Confined basically to the domestic sphere, her role was practically attached to her reproductive capacities. Exploitation on notions of sexuality, motherhood etc. have severely clipped the possibilities of a woman reaching out for other occupations: "Given the strength of biological explanations and expectations around sexuality, motherhood and childbirth, the family role and functions prescribed for women not only form a strong, economic and ideological construction but permeate throughout state institutions and create the foundations upon which the political management and regulation of women is institutionalized. In advanced capitalist societies, as with other patriarchal societies, the family has developed as an oppressive and constraining institution for women" (Chadwick and Little 325). Her reproductive role proved to be a constraint upon her life, limiting her involvement and participation in socio-cultural, economic and political affairs. However, it is not just biological factors alone that act as deterrent to women's lives but certain socio-cultural factors also go a long way in actually marginalizing their very existence. All the time relegated to a secondary position vis-à-vis men, women are pushed towards the periphery of existence. Gender differences and disparities which are observed and felt in all walks of life have become so very dominant that

they at times strengthen the already marginalized conditions of women. If we turn a few centuries back, it was natural for a woman not to be educated, be used as an object of barter, not use her rational capacities, not have any property rights or voting rights, not have any right to take any decision— in fact, her life was not her own at all. Bound by parameters of 'femininity'— a 'woman' existed only for man. She was created for the sole purpose of becoming a companion (definitely inferior and subordinate) to man. After all, Eve emerged out of Adam's ribs. From religious myths to scientific postulations, from art and poetry to the crude domestic gossips— society as a whole (dominated by men) worked hard and determinedly to prove women's inferior status: "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination. In the legends of Eve and Pandora men have taken up arms against women. They have made use of philosophy and theology, as the quotations from Aristotle and St Thomas have shown. Since ancient times satirists and moralists have delighted in showing up the weaknesses of women" (Beauvoir 22). Pitted against 'masculinity' is the notion of 'femininity'. The concept of femininity is glorified (in eulogies, drama and the other arts) as well as the need of it is asserted (in sermons, treatises etc.). Notions of inferiority and subordination were so preached that it came to be naturally and normally believed that women are inferior, irrational creatures and hence should exist under man's dominion and control. Since she cannot think for herself or take any decisions— it became man's responsibility to do the part. Codes of conduct and laws of behaviour (for women) have been passed from generation to generation. These have so permeated into the social structure that most of the norms are accepted and observed unquestioningly. Seemingly made for the benefit of women, these laws and regulations (made by man) contribute to a large extent in marginalizing women. Despite constituting half the human population women had been denied voting rights for centuries. They have been denied equal opportunities of education and career. Most women, even now, face discrimination in workplace. Women were 'angelic' beings with such womanly virtues such as — docility, shyness, morality and obedience. A woman's weaknesses (confirmed and proven by men, of course), leads to her dependence on man which also eventually leads to her subordination and marginalization. Ironically however, such imposed subordination was most often and is (even now) still either meekly internalized or reluctantly observed, dogmatically subscribed or vehemently protested.

In a patriarchal society, women occupy a marginalized position, vis-à-vis her family or the society. In a society, marginalization may occur at various levels and in many situations both men and women (including children, disabled, illiterate, gay, lesbian, African Americans, Native Americans, Dalits etc.) may be marginalised— "Marginalization is a slippery and multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized

at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities.” (Kagan et al. 2) Seen in the context of a rigid patriarchy, women are so bound by codes of conduct and values that they are forced to lead marginal lives. Notions of chastity, morality, goodness, femininity etc. are deeply entrenched in the psyche of individuals of a society. These notions are maintained and made to follow (sometimes forcefully). Any protest would be met with chastisement and in extreme cases, severe punishment. Any deviation from established codes of behaviour (especially, meant for women) could lead to severe criticism, reproving and also social ostracism. After all, even Sita (in *The Ramayana*) was not spared from social doubt and criticism and was forced to prove her chastity. Their voices have been muted for long. Conventionally, they are required to uphold the virtues of loyalty, morality, chastity etc. A little blemish on one's character was and is still unacceptable. Ironically, nobody questions man's frivolity or licentiousness. Why is a woman always exhorted to be meek and submissive? Despite sufferings and injustices, why is a woman always expected to tolerate? My paper aims to address and examine certain such issues. Why can a woman not protest? What is this fear that lurks within and silences her?

In India, people have been celebrating Durga Puja for centuries. Durga— the 'shakti'— the power which destroys evil. Durga puja celebrates the victory of good over evil. Armed with the powers of the gods, this goddess defeated Mahishashura (the demon) on the tenth day of the war. And hence, the tenth and the last day of the puja celebrations is called *bijoya dashami*— the day of victory. Every year, since time immemorial, people have been celebrating this symbolic victory of the good over evil. For centuries then, Devi Durga— the most powerful form of a 'woman' has been worshipped and revered by millions of men, women and children; and ironically, for centuries, women have also been exploited, repressed and marginalized by these same worshippers. As men and women begin celebrating this victory and pay obeisance to this mighty goddess of power— they somehow forget that there are many demons yet to be killed— these demons which are nurtured in our minds and thrive in our societies. What is the need for a man to bow down before a clay idol or lay flowers at the feet of the goddess, who beats up his wife and daughter everyday? For a woman, celebrating the goddesses's victory over evil becomes futile if she herself never protests against the evil done to her. In fact, such prayers and offerings bear no meaning in a society which would rather condemn a woman's protest and uphold a man's right to be cruel over the 'second sex'. This particular story, ironically and symbolically entitled 'Durga'— begins on *bijoya dashami*— the day when evil is overpowered. Three young girls— Laahi, Binita and Kalpana ventured out to have a last glimpse of

the departing goddess. The whole atmosphere was vibrating with the chants of 'Durga maa ki jai' as the devotees— young and old, streamed towards the river to see the immersion of the idols. It was a frenzied atmosphere with blazing music and swaying dances of young people. However, for the girls, the fun and joy was meant to be short-lived. As the girls walked towards the river, a hooligan misbehaved with Laahi. Astounded, she forcefully slapped the boy in retaliation. She was not someone who would tolerate silently the humiliation of being ill-treated in public. The boy, however, slapped her back with such force that she and her friends fell down. Laahi cut her cheek badly. Raging with anger and humiliation, Laahi cried vigorously. As her friends tried to pacify her, she raved and ranted at the boy. Surprisingly, Binita and Kalpana implored her to keep quiet. A situation which demanded protest and retaliation, however, saw the other two girls subdued and already in fear of dishonour and probable punishments (for no fault of theirs). They were already terrified thinking about the consequences of the incident. Instead of fighting back, they pleaded Laahi to stop complaining and bear the pain. To Laahi's utter shock, they revealed that they too were molested during the frenzy of the whole incident. Dumbstruck— Laahi could only ask them— were they not angry, were they not feeling humiliated? And a scar/blemish on one's (especially a woman's) name would need a lot of time to be erased. The fear of social censure is so deeply entrenched in the minds of most women that they ignore the fact that their dignity has been challenged. Laahi's cheek was badly cut and that would require some explanation. Despite making an effort not to reveal the actual incident, the news could not be concealed for long. In an instant, the mirth and happiness of the puja atmosphere bleakened. What remained was only reproach. Why did their daughter had to slap him, or couldn't she avoid him when he approached her, or why at all did she go to see Devi Durga's immersion?

It is sad and ironical that nobody praised her courage. It is sad that nobody felt her pain. It was even sadder that instead of being furious with the ruffian who ill-treated their daughter, they were instead angry with her. Fearing chastisement, Binita and Kalpana chose rather to keep quiet. Hence, Laahi remained the 'wrong' girl. Binita and Kalpana knew in their hearts that they were wrong, but they could never muster enough courage to retaliate or even face the harsh fact that they too were molested. They meekly acknowledged to Laahi that they could not do what she did— that is, protest. The deep cut had left a scar on Laahi's cheek. People flooded her with suggestions and remedies to remove the scar.

However, what about the scar entrenched in the hearts of the girls? The scar on the face would one day be erased. But what about the scar of humiliation? Will it ever be obliterated? Laahi never treated the scar. The scar remained on her face— a reminder of her helpless state of being as well as a reminder of the courage that she showed. The story ends with the three girls walking towards the college. Head held high, Laahi walked with the scar on her cheek. As their mothers watched their daughters walk away— Binita and Kalpana's mothers wondered at the confidence of Laahi— it was as if the scar was no more on her cheek but was rather shining on their daughters' cheeks. Durga epitomizes power— the power to conquer one's fear, the power to overpower evil. In Laahi's actions lies the very essence of *bijoya dashami*. Her protest against indignity and abuse is one step towards restoring and strengthening her sense of being and dignity. It remains, however, ironical and a brutal fact that the people who celebrate *bijoya dashami*— the symbolic victory of good over evil— did not stand up for a girl who tried to fight against the disrespect shown to her self. Sadly, Laahi belongs to a society which worships the 'image' of a woman, yet denies equal rights of speech and action to a living woman in real life. A society which always wants to see its women as the repository of all goodness, piety, morality and gracefulness cannot easily handle and admit the fact that a woman can also become the repository of strength, courage and dignity in real life. Laahi is no longer disturbed by the scar on her cheek. She at least showed the courage to retaliate. However, the scar (albeit invisible) would remain in the hearts of all the girls in general and in the hearts of the other two girls in particular— who out of fear did not stand up for themselves. This fear— the fear of censure, of chastisement is not uncommon in women in a patriarchal society. Relegated to a marginal position in home and society, a woman gradually loses her voice or is rather forced to lose her voice. Her life and decisions are taken by the man. Any action or behaviour which betrays the set standards for women would eventually mean further repression. This dreadful situation of being marginalized and growing up with the fear ultimately makes one diffident and unsure about oneself. One cannot blame Binita and Kalpana absolutely since they are a product of an environment where women had lived marginal lives and possibly have never known what it is to fight for one's dignity. Durga symbolizes the inherent strength in any person which lies latent but which must be invoked to destroy the evil. Maybe the writer wants to show that there is a 'Durga' inside every woman. As in the case of Laahi, it is up to the

woman to realize her inner strength, overpower every fear and fight to resist any kind of repression and marginalisation or assault on one's dignity/identity. But this can only be possible if menfolk are ready to undergo some kind of mental transformation which might take another century.

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