



Research Paper

Questioning Subalternity: Re-reading Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi'

Bhaskor Chandra Dutta,

Research Scholar, Department of English, Raiganj University, West Bengal, India.

ABSTRACT: A committed writer to the core of her being, Mahasweta Devi has been concerned with the uplift of the subaltern people of our society and her literary works are the medium of her social activism. She is not a votary of the 'Art for Art's sake' doctrine and her novels, plays, short fictions etc. are the eloquent expression of her social activism. She has become more and more conscious of the atrocities inflicted on the tribal people. This consciousness made her a dedicated social activist. In *Draupadi*, the eponymous tribal girl who is subjected to brutal rape and inhuman torture is represented by Mahasweta Devi as the subaltern who can really 'speak'.

KEYWORDS: Subaltern, social activism, Art for Art's sake, social activist, eponymous.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

"Draupadi" was published in Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories, titled "Agnigarbha" (Womb of Fires, 1978). It was later translated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and included in her collection of stories, titled 'Breast Stories' (2010). It is a story of brutal rape and excruciating torture suffered by a tribal woman called Draupadi who dares to confront the oppressive system represented by the Senanayak. The Draupadi of the Mahabharata was saved from dishonour and humiliation through divine intervention. But the eponymous heroine of the story, 'Draupadi' could not find any such superhuman assistance to save her modesty. But the inhuman torture to which she is subjected resurrected the rebel woman in her who emerges as the most eloquent voice against patriarchal and elitist domination.

Mahasweta Devi wrote "Draupadi" for representing the subaltern Indian Society. It depicts the economic, political, social and sexual oppression of the Dalit women in tribal areas. They suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender. Anguished tribals, disillusioned with twenty years' fake independence and frustrated with feudal-state nexus, join the Naxalite group being headed by Arijit and perpetrate revenge-killing on Surja Sahu and his sons. Dopdi and Dolna Mejhien who represent the anguished tribals here are found to lead the Naxalite movement in the story under discussion. Hence they incur the ire of administration and become the target of the Senanayak. They carry on clandestinely the activities of the Naxalites in the tribal belt in disguise in order to deceive the police.

Dopdi and her husband Dolna join in the naxalite movement. Police have been searching for them. They lie flat on the ground, pretending dead during the rebellion. They later flee the village to lead the life of fugitives. The couple maneuvers to escape the brutal forces of the police by using the guerilla type struggle. They fight with primitive and homely weapons such as hatches, and scythes, bows and arrows. Dedicating themselves absolutely to the cause of the Naxalite movement the couple works in different guises at different villages in the Jharkhani belt foregoing their dreams of a family and stable life for the larger goal of the movement which is to achieve a new social order and economic freedom. Proudly announcing themselves as soldiers, the couple – Dolna and Dopdi Mejhien pass on all details about the movement of the army to their comrades. The victimization of such a couple by the State forces highlights the predicament of the tribal people.

Here, through Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi has tried to raise certain question of responsibility, as she herself demands certain political responses from us. She expects us to know something about the Naxalbari movement and she also wants us to understand something about the revolution that Dopdi is fighting for us. The most interesting part of the story is that Dopdi is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Being a tribal means that she is not considered as a part of mainstream Indian society. She thus

occupies lowest rung in a class based society. We find here in the story that the status and respect women are accorded in tribal society is far superior to that of women in mainstream Hindu society. They are treated as equals and protected from the kind of denigration women face elsewhere, as Dopdi here in the story is fighting shoulder to shoulder with her husband. It is in the third part of the story that she is provoked to fight male oppression singly, and in the conclusion the use of the white clothe which is associated with purity and innocence, visually contrasted with Dopdi's black body, and is very powerful. So, here Mahasweta Devi represents Dopdi not as victim but she is equal to men who fight for her rights. Even Mahasweta's Draupadi raises her voice against extreme torture and atrocities inflicted on the tribal people.

The way of protest Dopdi takes is very different and makes it an extremely shocking, powerful and innovative narrative. She is an ordinary tribal woman but in reality she has created stir among police and military authorities who are on massive hunt for her. They remain confused about her real name, Dopdi or Draupadi. Dopdi is a peasant tribal name and Draupadi is derived from the name of the famous character in Mahabharata. In the epic, Draupadi is married to five Pandavas. Spivak says, "Within a patriarchal and patronymic context she is exceptional, indeed "attacker" in sense of odd, unpaired uncoupled. Her husbands, since they are husbands rather than lovers, are legitimately pluralized."(p.183) Mahasweta's story interrogates this singularity.

The Indian forces succeed in capturing the long wanted Dopdi with the tactics of the Bengali army officer, Senanayak. She is cross interrogated for an hour but she remains firm and does not utter a word. Then Senanayak commands the soldiers, "Make her. Do the needful."(195) At last apprehended by the army, Draupadi is tortured and raped throughout that endless night and mutilated by infinite lustful men:- "Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it."

After the tragic incident, Draupadi does not howl or behave like a helpless victim. In the morning, she refuses to put on her clothes, tears her piece of her clothes with her teeth, and wash herself. Her behaviour is incomprehensible, rather strange. In refusing to obey the command, she appears bigger than life to the all too calculating Senanayak, the army commander. She walks naked towards Senanayak in the clear sunlight, very uplifted and determined. She says:

".....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, kounter me come on, kounter me..... Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid." (p. 196)

Here the story is intensely powerful and shocking. Senanayak feels absolutely powerless and totally shaken. One wonders whether the story interrogates the lofty patriarchal traditions of Indian culture and what kind of identity is created for Draupadi? Draupadi is as much an object of that patriarchal narrative as she is viewed as an object by the men within the narrative. Draupadi would have dishonoured the male genealogy. In Mahasweta's story, no miracle happens and divine Krishna does not appear to save the honour of woman.

The story very successfully portrays what actually happens to women when they are seen as the objects. She presents her mutilated body to Senanayak as "the object of your search" (p.196). She stresses on the materiality of what women are for men; literally a 'target' on which they can exercise their power. Spivak says Dopdi is , "a part of the undoing of the opposites – the intellectual rural, internationalist tribalist – that is the unwavering constitution of 'the underground', and 'the wrong side' of the law." (p.108). She is the aberration to Senanayak, who remains fixed within his class, gender and ventures beyond them.

Instead of being saved by a miraculous incident, Dopdi is subjected to multiple rape. For showing protest, she remains naked at her own insistence:

"The guard pushes the water pot forward. Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth...Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind ...Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds...Draupadi's black body comes even closer ... and pushed Senanayak with her two mangled breasts." ("Draupadi" 103-4)

Here, Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, torture her, intimidate her, or let the rape diminish her. According to Sunder Rajan : "It is simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system of pertaining to nakedness and rape and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create the disconcerting counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy." Male sexual violence is defeated simply by its demystification and Dopdi emerges as "terrifying super object – an unarmed target."

In Mahasweta's story, Draupadi acquires a new self-definition and becomes the active maker of her own meaning. She refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as 'subject' and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence, she constructs a meaning which "Senanayak simply cannot understand" (P.196). She becomes that which resists 'counter' male knowledge, power and glory; therefore he is "terribly

afraid". So Gayatri Spivak says, "Dopdi is what the Draupadi who is written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text of male power could not be"(Spivak)

II. CONCLUSION:

The re-presentation of Draupadi in Mahasweta's story demolishes the traditional idea of the subaltern and the writer re-invents a new incarnation in the heroine of the story. It is through Dopdi that Mahasweta Devi effectively "dismantles Spivak contention in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' ". "In Dopdi, we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks loudly- literally and metaphorically for, her 'voice[...] is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation" – and makes herself heard.(Sen170).

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