

Celebration of the Body: A Re-Visioning of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

Dr. R. K. Ashalata Devi

Assistant Professor (S-2)

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Manipur University

e-mail: drslai@rediffmail.com

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to re-vision Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" to analyse the significance and the power of women's body. In the text, women's body is used as a tool to denigrate the phallus and also to subvert patriarchy. Through the character of Draupadi, Mahasweta portrays the inner strength of the naked female identity. Draupadi's resistance and her refusal to clothe after the multiple rape signifies the subversion of the centre-periphery antagonism. At the same time, the writer also urges the society the need to discard the old traditional conservative outlook on the concept of rape-the social stigma associated with rape and also points out that the honour of women is never lost when a woman is raped.

Keywords: Subaltern, Body, Patriarchy, Phallus, Hegemony, Rape.

Mahasweta Devi, the Magsaysay award winner and Padma Vibhushan, is one of India's foremost women writers, who tries to give space to the marginalised sections of Indian society, the downtrodden and dispossessed tribal population of India and the landless labourers of eastern India and their position within India. Being a committed writer, Devi employs her creative energy to explore the life of the subaltern in her writings. In her works, one can witness as well experience the deprivations, the pangs, the desires and longings, the frustrations, the dilemmas and the dreams and fantasies of the most neglected sections of our society - the marginalised and suppressed being of Indian society, whose life is filled with fear, insecurity, exploitation and injustice. Marginalized sections of society are generally left at the periphery as a result of which there is the diminished and distorted representation of their lives. The main cause of marginality is inequality created by the upper caste and elite people in the society who exercise their power against the marginalised to push the marginalised towards the margins. Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty introduced the world of Mahasweta's subalterns and their rebellions to the Anglophone world through her translation of the writings of Mahasweta. In her short stories, Mahasweta Devi attempts to re-write the history of the subalterns to help improve the condition of the subalterns, to enlighten the

reading public about the plight of the marginalised, deprived sections of Indian society and also to deconstruct the identity of the marginalised subverting the hegemony prevalent in Indian society.

Mahasweta is also one of the first Indian writers to address the concerns of Dalits and tribals, specially women, who suffers double marginalisation in the patriarchal Indian society. Patriarchy indicated to women the traditional role models of acceptable versions of the image of women and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. The typical images of women are indeed a patriarchal construction which in turn exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchy itself. In patriarchy, even women's sexuality and desires are made and treated as subservient to that of the male's. However, when women write about themselves as women, the neglected areas of women's experience are given prominence and reconstructed which suggest alternative picture of the conditions, desires, psychology of the women. The voice of the women to have their own space in which they could speak and express freely what they want and desire in life can only be heard prominently in the writings of women.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir makes the famous statement that "one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman" suggesting that the concept of gender (masculinity and femininity) is a social construct. She also says that the relegation of women into a "second sex", as an object of sex and the "other" is also a fallacy. So, women must subvert the phallic version of the symbolic misogyny to assert their identity as women who is not to be treated as an apprentice to men but an equal subject to men. On the other hand, Luce Irigaray, the radical French feminist, asserts that women's writing is fluid, dynamic, polysemy and plural. The multiplicity of women's writing can be found in the body of women because a woman's "sexuality, always at least double, is in fact *plural*" (Irigaray, 387).

"Draupadi", the much acclaimed short story, was first published in Bengali in the collection *Agnigarbha* ("Womb of Fire") in 1978 as a collection of loosely connected, short political narratives. In 1997, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated it into English and published in *Breast Stories*, a collection of three short stories namely, "Breast-giver" (*Satnadayani*), "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice" (*Choli ke Pichhe*). In the "Introduction" to *Breast Stories*, Gayatri Spivak points out that the three stories are "about the breast" and "the breast is not a symbol in these stories", rather "the breast is what the stories have in common" (Gayatri, vii). Further, she says that "the breast is indeed a powerful part object, permitting the violent coming-into-being of the human, on the uncertain cusp of nature and culture" (Gayatri, xiii).

The protagonist of the story, Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen, is a derivation from the epic heroine Draupadi, the efficient cause of the great battle of the great Indian classical epic *Mahabharata*. Mahasweta rewrites the episode of Draupadi's unclothing in the *Mahabharata*. In the epic, Draupadi was asked to unclothe in front of the whole court when Yudhistira, who had staked all he owned, including Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, lose the game of

dice against the kauravas. When Dushashana begins to pull Draupadi's sari, Draupadi prays to Krishna to save her. She is protected by Krishna and thus her honour and respect was saved by a man. She cannot be publicly stripped because Krishna has infinitely clothed her. On the contrary, in Mahasweta's short story, it is the men who unclothes the protagonist and again ask her to clothe herself. Dopdi refuses to clothe herself and defies the system dismantling and questioning patriarchy. Even though the men are able to strip Draupadi easily it is her own decision to remain naked in public. There is no man, the benign and divine man like Krishna to protect and save Draupadi's honour. In this case, the male leadership or chauvinism ends and woman takes the centre position with the help of her own body celebrating and glorifying the naked female identity. Draupadi acts as an agent or subject and acts on the men. In the "Translator's Preface" to *Breast Stories*, Gayatri points out the parallelism and contrast between the two characters:

It would be a mistake, I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is (as heroic as) Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi-written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power-could not be. Dopdi is at once palimpsest and a contradiction. (Gayatri, 10)

The story has at its backdrop the Naxalbari movement in Bengal in the 1970s which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against the landlords and money lenders. "Draupadi" revolves around Dopdi Mejhen's career as a Naxalite. Dopdi Mejhen, who belongs to the Santhal tribe, represents the voice of other voiceless marginalized tribal people in the centri-focal universe. She is an activist of the Naxalite movement of the seventies who played an active role in Operation Bakuli in 1971 in the area of the northern part of West Bengal. In fact, she is a fugitive on the run from the police. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and two versions of her name, Dopdi and Draupadi:

Name Dopdi Mejhen, age 27, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankraharh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...

An exchange between two medallioned *uniforms*.

FIRST MEDALLION. What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name?

SECOND MEDALLION. Draupadi Mejhen. Born the year her mother threshed rice at Surja Sahu (killed)'s at Bakuli. Surja Sahu's wife gave her the name. (Devi, 16)

Dopdi and her husband, Dulna worked for the upliftment of the landless peasants, the so called subalterns, the marginalised sections of the society. After killing Surja Sahu and his son, they could occupy the "upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought, not

surrendering those three young men to the police” (Devi, 17), and escaped from Bakuli. Captain Arjan Singh, who is in charge of Bankrajharh police station, fails to apprehend the couple. However, Mr. Senanayak, “the elderly Bengali *specialist* in combat and extreme-Left politics” (Devi, 18), who replaced Arjan Singh, succeeds in his attempt to capture Draupadi using her husband Dulna’s dead body as bait. Senanayak is an army officer who works by the motto of “*apprehension and elimination*” (Devi, 20). He is able to regain the confidence of the soldiers through his lectures and new means of warfare. For him, “the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier” (Devi, 19). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reflects that “in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First World scholar in search of the Third World”. (Gayatri, 1). He prides himself on his intimate knowledge of the tribals. He is the army chief who torments Dopdi. On being apprehended, Senanayak wants a complete submission from Dopdi and for that she is shamed to the core and turned into an object of gaze and pleasure. When the dinner hour approaches, Senanayak walks out of the camp after ordering his men to “make her. *Do the needful*” (Devi, 31). Eventually, Dopdi is raped in the custody and she is unable to remember how many men raped her:

She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?”

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breast, and understands that, indeed, she’s made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi had passed out (Devi, 31).

The whole night, the multiple rape continues, Draupadi hoping against hope inside the cell. But the men, “the foxes” come to devour her and “the process of making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it” (Devi, 32)

In the morning, Draupadi is asked to clothe herself as the Burra Sahib wants her to be presented in front of him in the tent. To make Draupadi a presentable woman, the guard gives her water to bathe to clean her body and also her white piece of clothe to dress. However, Draupadi refuses to clothe and she tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. She stands in front of the enemy group that reminds the incident where Draupadi of *Mahabharata* is brought to stand among the men in the court. Unlike the epic heroine Draupadi, Dopdi resists and with her resistance, the notion of guilt, fear and shame that are typically associated with the discourse of women’s writing is turned upside down. The commotion created by Draupadi’s strange behaviour is beyond words to express. Senanayak and the guards see the naked woman, the woman they raped standing in front of them without any clothe. They couldn’t

face Draupadi with her “thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds” (Devi, 33). However, Draupadi, instead of feeling ashamed, depressed and humiliated, comes closer to Senanayak and mocks at the process of making her. She challenges the brutalizer, denigrates his false masculine pride and challenges him to ‘*kounter*’ her. Instead of lamenting at the loss of her “honour”, she goes forward to question the masculinity of her “maker”:

Draupadi’s black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, 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 a bloody gob at and says, There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my clothe on me. What more can you do? Come on, *kounter* me--come on, *kounter* me--? (Devi, 33)

In challenging the man to *kounter* her, Draupadi acts for herself as a woman and here one can say that the “voice of male authority fades” (Gayatri, 11).

The significance of women’s body, how the body can be used to deconstruct the identity of women is one of the major concerns preoccupied with the radical feminists. In her essay, “Radical Feminism I”, Canadian radical feminist, Bonnie Kreps opines that women’s bodies are their property and individual men or governments should not interfere with women’s body. Further, she says that to fight oppression, “women must be freed from their present partial or complete slavery to the species. They must have the right to decide over their own bodies” (Kreps, 48). Correa and Petchesky in “Reproductive and Sexual Rights: A Feminist Perspective” also asserts that

To affirm the right of women to “control over” or “ownership of” their bodies does not mean that women’s bodies are mere things, separate from themselves or isolated from social networks and communities. Rather, it connotes the body as an integral part of one’s self, whose health and wellness (including sexual pleasure) are a necessary basis for active participation in social life (Correa and Petchesky, 124).

Through Draupadi, Mahasweta depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body and her inner feminine core to fight against patriarchy, marginality, suppression and oppression. She emerges as a powerful woman after the multiple rape and refuses to clothe and wash her body. In the story, Draupadi is in the position of a subaltern, a marginalized whose voice always remains silent and sidelined. However, she transgresses breaking the age-old perception and raises her voice asserting the human dignity of the

subalterns. She becomes an independent woman who could defy and withstand any kind of oppression and humiliation. She does not give up ideologies in spite of the ill treatment shown to her. Instead, she derives her strength and courage from the predicament of the extremity of the suppression: "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breast, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (Devi, 33). By remaining naked, she produces a sense of awe and bewilderment incomprehensible to her male oppressors. Senanayak, the army officer, is totally shocked that his male ego is crushed to the core. In front of the tribal rebel, he acts like a victim and could not raise his voice-the stereotyped authoritative male voice which always undermines the voice of women. Through Draupadi's reaction, Mahasweta uses the physical body of the woman to dismantle as well overthrow patriarchy. Indeed, the body becomes an effective tool to resist and question the male misogyny which enables the woman to transfer the guilt from the victim to the perpetrators.

Dopdi's act can be seen as an act that subverts the exploitative system of patriarchy and empowers the women. In Dopdi, we have a subaltern woman, who speaks loudly for herself as subject acting on men. It is her inner strength and courage that dare to look at the men without any inhibition. Through her resistance and self assertion, she celebrates the women's body overthrowing patriarchy. Kamala Bhasin, one of India's well-known feminist and social activist, says that rape cannot destroy women because women's honour and vice versa society's honour is not dependent on women's body i.e. vagina:

When I'm raped, people say
That I've lost my honour. How
Do I lose my honour? My
Honour is not in my vagina. It is
A patriarchal idea that my
Rape will defile the honour of
My community. I'd like to tell
Everyone, why did you place
Your community's honour in a
Woman's vagina? We never did
That. It is the rapist who loses
His honour, we don't.

Mahasweta Devi urges the readers to celebrate the unique female body; to glorify the strength, courage and the indomitable spirit of women and also to rejoice at the defeat and submission of patriarchy. To enable to re-write women's history, women must love their body, write and talk about their body because the body represents the epitome of womanhood

which has the power to subvert the conservative ideas associated with women in general and rape in particular. No man owns the body of the women; women's body do not exist for men's pleasure. Women themselves are the owners of their body. Hence celebrate the body.

Works Cited:

- Bhasin, Kamala. Quotes. net STAND S4LLC, 2017 Web. 21 April 2017
<http://www.quotes.net/authors/kamala/Bhasin1997.htm>.
- Correa, Sonia, Rosalind Petchesky, "Reproductive and Sexual Rights: A Feminist Perspective". *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003, 2010, pp 119-132.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997, 2016.
- Irigary, Luce. "This sex Which is Not One". *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003, 2010, pp 384-389.
- Kreps, Bonnie. "Radical Feminism I". *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003, 2010, pp 46-50.
- McCann, Carole, Seung-kyung Kim. Eds. *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003, 2010.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, --, pp.66-111. pdf. Planetarities.web.unc.edu>files>2015/01. Accessed 25 May 2017.
- "Introduction". *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997, 2016, pp. vii-xiv.
- "Translators Preface". *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997, 2016, pp. 1-15.