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Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi: A feministic approach

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Abstract

Feminism is the key theme of the stories of Mahashweta Devi. She always focuses on the problems and challenges of subaltern women. She has been concerned with the uplift of 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. In the story of Draupadi, Devi has illustrated the tragic story of a subaltern woman. It is a story of Dopdi Mejhen, the most wanted tribal revolutionary woman who went underground and influenced many tribal youth to fight against injustice. At last she was arrested and gang raped in the police custody. The climax of the story lies in the manner Dopdi turns her terrible injuries, pain and humiliation into a means of counter offensive. She faced derogatory treatment from the police in the name of interrogation only because she was a female rioter.

Keywords: Feminism, subaltern, art for art's sake, social activism

Introduction

Feminism has always been considered as one of the movement like any other movement either socially or literally. Sometimes it gets a place in literature with all other theories which have less of a sentimental approach. Feminism has come down to us or has evolved gradually as a theory, but lots of females, the marginalized section of the society, has changed less than slowly over the years. We are still fighting the same age old battle of repression and suppression; the same mental and physical humiliation; the same trauma of being born a woman. The woes and the stigma of a female humiliated remains the same. There seems to be no end to the mental and physical violence faced by the women in the society.

"I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society.... I ask myself this question a thousand times: Have I done what I could have done?"

- (Mahasweta Devi's interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak).

Less of a feminist and more of a humanist, Mahasweta Devi claims that a woman should be judged as a human and not from the point of view of gender, race, caste and class. She portrays the true face of feminist assertion, whereas Draupadi uses her wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized identity. Mahasweta Devi's stories exposes all sort of exploitations and oppressions that prevail in the post independent Feudal society. She takes to task all those exploiting agencies who are responsible for the existence of the neo colonial situation in the country.

She is committed to the cause of the marginalized sections of the society. Various problems of these people find expression in her works. She writes about the problems of landless labours, brick-kiln workers, slum dwellers, untouchables and the tribal people. She is more concerned the problems of the de notified tribes like Lodhas, Kherias and Shabars. Her anger and protest are always directed towards oppressive landlords, money lenders, corrupt politicians and government officers.

Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' first appeared in Agnigarbha, a collection of political narratives. It displays two forms of resistance—first resistance is in the form of tribal insurgencies and the second is acted out by Dopdi Mejhen, an active worker of the Naxalbari movement who is hunted down and raped in a bid to subjugate insurgent groups.

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The female protagonist, Draupadi, who is a tribal insurgent, gets captured during her outrageous tribal uprisings against the government. After her capture, she is beguiled for giving information about her companions. Because of her dedication, she is subjected to third degree in police custody; till the government officer Senanayak gives orders to "Make her. Do the needful," She is brutally subjected to gang rape through the endless silent suffering night. After this barbaric act of violating the female honour Draupadi proceeds daringly towards Senanayak and, she confronts her exploiters naked and bleeding, thereby making the rapists I shameful of how to face this unexpected situation, and the reader distressed and sorry for their cruelty.

In "Draupadi," when we first encounter our protagonist Dopdi, she is living in the Jharkhani forest with a group of Naxalite rebels referred to as the "young gentlemen." The fact that such behaviour is unorthodox for a woman of the Santal tribe is brought out when Dopdi harkens back to times past with nostalgia and adoration: "Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women's blood in black armor".

These reminiscences reveal several significant facts about the Santal tribe. Firstly, women were clearly "protected" by the men of the tribe as the phrase "stood guard over their women's blood" implies. Secondly, as a group that expected and received such patriarchal "protection," the women seem not to have engaged in warfare for Dopdi does not mention forefathers in this regard. Thus the proud reference to the "black armour" of the forefathers is also significant, as this seems to indicate that the Santal men were perhaps (good) warriors. Clearly then Dopdi's existence in the forest as a militant in the Naxalite movement, among strange men, bereft of the protection of her husband Dulna, is transgressive. The question then is, does she emerge as an agent? In order to answer this query an examination of Dopdi's role in the movement is important. To speculate upon this role, we have to consider the Mahabharata itself. The Mahabharata contains instances of various kinds of kinship structure and various styles of marriage. It is Draupadi who provides the only example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India. She is married to the five sons of the impotent Pandu. Within the Patriarchal and Patronymic Context, she is exceptional indeed singular in the sense of odd unpaired uncoupled. Her husbands since they are husbands rather than lovers are 'Legitimately pluralized'. No acknowledgment of paternity can secure the name of the father for the child of such a mother.

Captured prisoners are usually subjected to repeated cycles of torture. Particularly when high profile prisoners are captured, the captors often take turns to inflict torture individually. In the case of women, they are repeatedly raped by the official personnel until they concede, thus signifying the triumph of patriarchal subjugation over the marginalized female. This form of political intimidation is not instigated by any individual or a group, it is often means on the part of the state to exert their control over dissenting people. Dopdi's long-awaited capture created a similar environment of enthusiasm and relief in the camp. The incapability of the General and other government personnel to apprehend a woman over the years actually challenged their masculine identity. As such, by engaging in the act of rape and torture, they attempted to re-establish their physical authority over Dopdi. At the same time, torture seems to have been conceptualized as a form of

entertainment to break the monotony of the quotidian. Moreover, while the General was sympathetic to the doctrine of insurgents like Dopdi, he believed in the ideology that in order to destroy the enemy he had to become one.

Thus, the fine line between the pre-conceived notions of 'civilized' and 'savage' gets blurred. The actions of the General actually enabled the creation of a space of violence to justify his own ends. In his attempt to interchange ranks, the physical torture and psychological humiliation that was inflicted on Dopdi under his command actually consolidated the culture of violence which his civilized intellectual self had previously condemned. When she defies the General by refusing to cover her disfigured body at the end of the narrative, she "figuratively forces her captors to confront an image of their own brutality, for which her exposed and mutilated body becomes a signifier".

Mahashweta Devi reimagines the portrayal of mythical Draupadi by situating her in the contemporary socio-political and historical backdrop of the Naxalite Movement in Bengal. Quoting Sharma, "Instead of destroying the intricacies of myths she indulges with these deconstructive theories to eventually recast them as the metaphors of empowerment and affirmation." In the narrative, Mahashweta introduced us to Dopdi as part of a conversation between two armed personnel, who were examining the two versions of her name - "Draupadi" and "Dopdi". While the differences in pronunciation merely distinguish between the Sanskritised and the tribalised form of the word "Draupadi", Dopdi is a reimagined and demythicised avatar of the eponymous Draupadi from Mahabharata. When Draupadi's eldest husband lost her to the Kauravas in a game of dice, she did not emerge as a heroine in her own right. Though her status as a polyandrous woman situated her in an apparent position of authority over the five Pandava brothers, she was reduced to nothing but a commodity which the eldest brother staked at the game. Instead of generating her own narrative of defiance, she turned to the incarnate Krishna as the Kauravas began to disrobe her in public. It was Krishna's divine intervention that preserved the "dignity" of Draupadi in the ancient epic. The character of Dopdi, on the other hand, has been thoroughly reimagined by Mahasweta. She was easily disrobed by the armed personnel and repeatedly raped throughout the night on the day of her capture. This story represents the upper class story where so called God is present saving her. However, her position among her husband give the reader a strange idea of her legitimized pluralization in Singularity which completely limited. In Dopdi' life, no god can save her. She is brutally gang raped and leaving carelessly on the floor.

Later she did not show any signs of mortification and questioned the guard proudly when he ordered her to enter the General's tent. As a symbol of defiance, Dopdi refused to cover her mutilated body and tore the piece of clothing she was offered. In spite of the fact that she was naked and vulnerable, she declared that there was not a single man around her who could make her feel undignified. As Dopdi pushed the General back with her bruised breasts, he was genuinely terror-stricken by an unarmed captive for the first time. Instead of relying on male intervention, Dopdi engendered her own instrument of resistance. Unlike her legendary counterpart, Dopdi countered the patriarchal construct of "sexual honour" and transformed her

victimhood into agency. Overcoming the sentiments of guilt, fear, or shame that are customarily associated with rape and other forms of sexual oppression, Dopdi subverted this discourse of political violence by rendering the violence itself impotent. As Spivak remarks, "She is what Draupadi - written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male pow of the marginalized sections of the society like the tribals, Dalits, and women in their quest for transcending the subaltern status and making their voices heard in the wider cultural and socio-political milieu of the nation could not be."

This short story reverberates the bitter, powerful and shocking realities of present time which is based on the lofty patriarchal traditions of Indian culture. Devi shows what actually happens to a woman when she is seen as a mere 'target object'.

Therefore, Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi" emerges as the representative of the society like dalits, the tribals and women in their quest for transcending the subaltern status and making their voices heard in the wider cultural and socio-political milieu of the nation.

The writer portrays a new incarnation in the heroine of the story and the re-presentation of Draupadi demolishes the traditional idea of the subaltern. It is through Dopdi that 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. Her voice is terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation – and makes herself heard. In Draupadi, Devi presents a strong woman who despite being marginalized and exploited, transgresses conventional sexual and societal standards. Dopdi subverts the physicality of her body from powerlessness into powerful resistance. She does not represent the tribal woman by romanticizing her depiction of Dopdi but instead realistically re-presents herself through simple language and complex emotions. Draupadi recognizes a woman's body as an asset through which they can resist the socio-political objectification of their bodies and overcome oppression.

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