

Unarmed Mutiny of Draupadi in Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Courtesy: <http://vintageindianclothing.tumblr.com/post/57661535801/epic-post-1-one-of-the-central-and-much>

Abstract

In this paper, the focus will be on Mahasweta Devi's piece of art *Draupadi* and its comparison with its compatriot "Draupadi" of the epic Mahabharat. Mahasweta Devi pinpoints a perceived necessity of sounding a strong protest by creating a defensive resistance against echelon hegemony of upper caste and caste-bound discrimination. She brings to light the pain,

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suffering and silence forcefully hurled on marginalized, victimized lower class or Dalits. She discusses the experiences that thrive on presumed mainstream-marginal or core-periphery relationships. The main attraction lies in the composure and tolerance of Draupadi who wades through the ordeal of barbaric acts perpetrated on her and sheds no tears, nor sighs, and her hysteric laughter unnerves the tyrants. She, single handedly, unarmed, as a soldier of her caste, challenges the entire authority and defeats them by her confidence and shames them into making amends for the shame they hurled on her by stripping her off.

Keywords: Draupadi, Dalits, caste-bound discrimination, marginalized

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

The story here for discussion – Draupadi brings forth the character Draupadi who, being tribal, wrongly pronounces her own name in tribal form, Dopdi. “The life of Dopdi is circumscribed and straitjacketed by the norms and principles of a prejudiced society. Dopdi and her husband’s woeful tale starts from the Naxalite movement of the seventies – a movement of poor and illiterate peasants dwelling in the forest, meadows and plateaus fighting just for their living and survival.”¹

Mahabharata's Draupadi

“The striking similarity between this Dopdi and Mahabharata’s Draupadi is the destiny they share with each other. Draupadi in Mahabharata suffers terribly; despite being the wife of five illustrious brothers, she was thrown out of her home and disgraced with the attempt at stripping off of her garment.”² Her dignity was compromised when she had to serve a queen below her former rank of Maharani, incognito, one year. Draupadi was principal queen of Yudhisthir who performed ‘*Rajsuya Yagna*’. In those days it was an insignia of prestige and high status. Yudhisthir was the king who was superior to the king of Virat whom they served incognito.

“Draupadi’s sons were killed in sleep and her modesty was outraged in full view of court even in the presence of her kinsfolk. She didn’t possess archetypal feminine sensibilities of silent suffering, offering self-sacrifice or unconditional subservience to authority.”³

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She was yet the one to cry out her mind seeking justice, frets and fumes, hurls curses and seeks vengeance on her accused. With her own virtues, she comes out of the shadow of her royal ancestry. All her virtues of being sharp-witted, intelligent, well-versed in court matters, her foresight spell self-disaster on her. How she broke court decorum finds references and very well related in the great epic, Mahabharata, but how she felt when the Pandavas (her erstwhile husbands) decided and rationalized over what to do with her at a different stage of her life, what kind of affection or respect she earned from them, are never discussed anywhere in the epic.

“She is never acclaimed as a self-effacing mother like Kunti or devoted wife like Gandhari, she maintains her stature amidst her peers in solitary resolution and mute sympathy. Ironically, she is held responsible for the great Mahabharata war, fought for the establishment of order and righteousness.”⁴

Dealing with Complexities of a Dalits's life - The story of Dopdi

“All these evocative aspects of Draupadi's character open up the possibilities for modern authors dealing with complexities of a Dalits's life.”⁵ Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* also conceptualizes the awful experiences of Dalits, especially women in her work Dopdi'. “This Dopdi is not a princess having blue blood in her veins but a destitute, impoverished tribal, dark Santal girl, wanted by army as an accomplice in Naxalite operations.”⁶ The character of Dopdi, here, unfolds, the terrible tales of poverty, injustice, victimization and also criminalization. Her only fault is to provide shelter to a Naxalite youth; she and her husband were, by default, supposed to be connected with the murder of landowners, they were also accused of drawing some water from upper caste well during drought. They were among few who had miraculous escape when thousands of tribal people were gunned down, mowed down under the impression of being connected with Naxalites.

“The couple had to seek refuge in impenetrable forests of Jhankhani and a fierce battle ensued between the advanced war equipment on the one side and bows and arrows on the other side.”⁷ Misuse of law and power by state agencies to endorse money lenders and caste system, to

subjugate the peasant tribal revolt, that too for a mouthful meal is ironically, depicted in following lines:

...Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such
(guerrilla warfare with hatchet, scythe, bow and arrows) warfare is
the sacred duty of every soldier. Dopdi and Dulna (her husband)
belong to the category of such fights ... (138)

The Bloody Tales of Young Intellectuals

The story of Dopdi not only brings to the forefront a poignant tale of her life, but also narrates the bloody tales of young intellectuals who rebelled against injustice inflicted on the tribals and led the ill-fated Naxalite movement entailing suppression, oppression, annihilation in parts of Orissa, UP, Bihar, and Jharkhand in the late sixties. The outburst of the illiterate but assertive people, culminated into a bloody violence. A directionless mayhem caused by unplanned rebellion, shaped up by emotions, enthusiasm and primitive war weapons was subdued with incomparable strength of the border forces and army, but the uprisings marked and registered their significance because both Dopdi and Dulna will never die, but always remain in the hearts of people, inspiring them to take arms against injustice.

Dopdi and Dulna

Dopdi and Dulna, under the impression of being associated with Naxalites, met a terrible fate, predictable enough – the army has no parallel in might and ammunition. As a matter of fact, Dulna was gunned down and Dopdi was taken in for interrogation and this lasted till Sun bathed her naked body – crushed and bloody through tortures all night long. “What is surprising here - not the bruised body and of soul of Dopdi, but her will to tolerate, survive and surmount the torture, her ability to face the ordeal and those procedures to inflict pain, and humiliation on her in particular, in general to break the spirit of rebellion.”⁸ Dopdi revives this spirit and being propelled by it, she questions the Sena nayak, next morning, at officers’ camp, walking straight to him, upright and nude.

“You can strip me, but now can you clothe me again?” (146)

She had no saviour like Krishna to rescue her from physical violence and public shame, but she had a voice – terrifying, sky splitting as sharp and hoarse as her ululation.

“Draupadi did cast shame on the king’s courtiers and even Bhishma by her articulation and left them dumbfounded by her wisdom and reason; in the same way, the questions of Draupadi about re-clothing her after stripping her off her clothes, make the army officers dumbstruck and terrified.”⁹

Draupadi refuses to put on clothes, stripped off her in the dark night and hypocritically provided to her to cover and hide her wounds and scars as a mark of shame - less, for her and rather more for her accused. “Rejection here is not of bundle of some fabric but of possessive imposition of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ on the female body, male hegemony – forceful humiliation on women, a patriarchal attitude to observe women – subdued, silent and pitiable.”¹⁰

Draupadi here gains renewed energy and tremendous strength by consciously, vehemently discarding her stripped off clothes and makes the well-dressed Sena Nayak to lower his eyes in shame and fear at the sight of the bruised, blood stained and bitten body of a dark woman. All high talks of ‘making up’ of poor unfed tribal people, all feelings of elation at prospects of being able to reinstate, presumably, moral but unmistakably the patriarchal structure of law and order in impenetrable forests crumble to the ground; unfathomable boundless mystery of forests stare in face of Sena Nayak, along with the numerous starving poor children of untouchable tribals who courageously try to evolve out of desperation and hopelessness.

Fictionalized Representation of History

The story, in every respect, remains a fictionalized representation of history in a different way because the primitive weapons like bows, arrows and axe represent the instinctive dexterity of the forest people at self-preservation and cunning ambush. “The male force of artillery fire is tackled and counter attacked by female guerilla warfare.”¹¹

The direct attack launched by armed forces on green cover, combing of forest for tribal rebels - instinctive, poorly armed and unguarded, leading fugitive lives, easily tracks them; the

killing of a rich money lender, in reality, propelled authorities to unleash terror and wreak havoc on tribal fighters, mistaken for rebels. This killing of the rich landowner, Surjon Sahay was accidental, in need of water during drought as 'human patience catches easily in drought'; but this incident puts the tribal populace on their toes, to flee in exile – half-fed, half-clad, unfed, sleepless, barefooted.

Dopdi and Dulna's resolution gets strengthened by this plight of fellow tribesmen and also their ultimate slaughter in name of law and order. Dopdi makes a mockery of the toughness of Sena Nayak as he has no answer to the challenges offered and thrown to him by an illiterate, defiled and defiant tribal woman. The uselessness of his fake theory of warfare and even worse practice surface themselves as he cringes in dreadful fear before Dopdi – For the first time Sena Nayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target terribly afraid.

Mahasweta Devi's Comparison

Coming back to the comparison of Dopdi with Draupadi in Mahabharata, the writer pinpoints that both characters realize that the male claim to protect their honor is only an eyewash – a pretension. Mythological Draupadi proves her worth and asserts herself by dignity preserved. This Dopdi makes her presence felt by dignity compromised and plundered. Epic Draupadi lost trust in her kinsmen as nobody came to her rescue and displayed sheer helplessness. Dopdi here lost all her kinsmen in army operation and felt out of place in her own establishments.

Having witnessed the sham of social hierarchy, they emerge out to be more open, confident and self-reliant. This prolonged parallelism between the epic heroine and the tribal laborer Draupadi, the presumed analogy between the two leads to a revealing realization of *Dalit* identity and their inherent reason for protest.

Draupadi's modesty was outraged, basically to degrade her physically and through her scarred body weakening the spirit of tribal males was desired. The same attempt was made by Kauravas to dishonour Draupadi (Mahabharat epic) by disrobing her in the presence of courtiers to cut to pieces the pride of the Pandavas. Disrobing female body as happened in case of both

these women is commonly viewed by society as a symbol of female degradation, female submission and the stripping of honor and humanity.

Disrobing of garments here create a dramatic climax. In Mahabharata's Draupadi, the unveiling of garments reveals immense female power. The act of disrobing result in a striking male reaction and symbolize the remarkable survival of a battered and abused woman. Dopdi, being strong in will and mind is strengthened by rape.

“Now Dopdi’ spreads her arms, raises her face to sky, turns towards the forest and ululates with the force of her entire being, once, twice, three times”. (195) She ‘tears her piece of cloth with her teeth’ and astonishes the general with her nakedness. She gives a calm, confident and a stringent answer to Sena Nayak : “You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me.” (196)

Dopdi uses her feminine nakedness as a weapon against her enemy. She unveils herself to turn the violence, she endured, upon the man who perpetrated it on her. Instead of allowing this abhorrent act to strip her of her dignity and sensibility, she is empowered by ‘this violence’.

Epic Draupadi proved her chaste demeanour after her unaccomplished vastraharan (stripping off her clothing), Dopdi also proves her might, her presence and her ideology to propagate the rights of tribals and their need for survival in her battered body; she narrates the woeful tale of her entire tribal community in all her suffering and in all her defiance sprouted from inequity.

So, the symbolic meaning of Draupadi – cleansing by the fire of suffering and torture realizes its significance. The modesty of both characters is outraged; vicious attempts of Dusshasan (pulling and dragging Draupadi by her hair before the entire court) brought doom to the Kauravas and razed their crowning glory to dust; here also, the adamant will of Dropadi, her dare to accept the nakedness not of her but of the authorities, provided new dimensions to the tribal struggle and unnerved the perpetrator of torture. In short, Dopdi fails to enjoy divine status and escalation of prestige as epic Draupadi earned, but somehow, she has registered her presence by her utmost suffering and sacrifice that will remain, echoing in the annals of tribals and the

crime charts of authorities, and traditionally dominant male societies, as a reminder of their cruelty and the befitting reaction of the Woman.

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