
ELEMENTS OF MYTHOLOGY, FICTION AND REALITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "DRAUPADI"

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" is one among the short stories in her breast trilogy entitled *Breast Stories*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is the story of a female tribal subaltern named Dopdi, a most wanted naxalite from post-colonial India, who is hunted down by the police and subjected to extreme sexual harassment and gang raped in the name of search and interrogation. But to the great shock of her tormenters she emerged powerfully, refused to clothe herself and fights back with her nudity. She shames and instills a fear in the minds of her tormenters and thereby shattered the notions of patriarchy and male-dominated society. This paper attempts to explore how Mahasweta Devi's protagonist Dopdi or Draupadi in the short story "Draupadi" emerges powerfully from the scariest and worst events in her life and fights back with strong determination and will power thereby pose a threat to patriarchy.

Key words: Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Rape.

Introduction: Mahasweta Devi, a daring and tireless political activist, academician, journalist and creative writer, is widely acknowledged as one of India's foremost literary personalities. The stark realities around her paved way to become a writer – activist. This activist writer, even in her late eighties, travels extensively and collect first hand knowledge about the people she writes about. Among her contemporary Indian writers, Devi occupies a unique position through her exceptional perspectives on social and political life apart from the commitment to the poor, downtrodden and the de-notified tribals. Her writings not only give voice to India's marginalized tribal people but also stress the abject subordination of women in Indian society. Draupadi is her most powerful short story and the most powerful woman character.

Mythology: Draupadi is one of the most powerful female characters in the epic Mahabharata, believed to be written by Sage Vyasa long ago. Throughout the epic retold by C. Rajagopalachari, she is known for her strength, individuality and determination in the face of extreme challenges in life. Among the different and diverse characters in the great composition of all ages, Draupadi occupies a prime position, for, the war between Kauravas and Pandavas was waged in response to a vow taken by this powerful woman. Daughter of king Drupada, Draupadi is married to the Pandava brothers after Arjuna wins her in a svayamvara. Thus she becomes the wife of five brothers. When Yudhishthira loses in gambling, he is compelled to surrender his country and all of his possessions to the Kaurava clan, who adopts treacherous tactics in the game. The eldest of the Pandava brothers, Yudhishthira finally decides to continue the game by staking his wife Draupadi. Yudhishthira loses again and Duryodhana summons Draupadi to the recreational hall of the palace with a

view to harass the Pandavas by outraging her modesty.

Despite her protests, Dushasana drags Draupadi by her hair from her seclusion and attempts to disrobe her as directed by Duryodhana. A helpless Draupadi protects herself from the extreme humiliation by invoking Lord Krishna who in turn blesses her by miraculously lengthening her sari and prevents Dushasana from disrobing her. The humiliated Draupadi takes a vow that she will wash, comb or braid her hair only after taking revenge on her humiliators. According to Liz Wilson, "She makes her violated condition conspicuous by displaying the unbraided hair that was an instrument of her violation. There is much ambiguity in this exposure. It clearly goes against the norms of self-presentation for a Hindu married woman of her class. And, yet it is also a sign of modesty, a symbol of Draupadi's intent to make herself up properly once she has been avenged. (141)

Fiction: Though Draupadi's struggles have been made epic several centuries ago and Mahasweta Devi has written about her Dopdi three decades ago, one can see a number of women with similar characters in real life as well. They are in fact poetic extensions of the above mentioned literary characters. From Vyasa's Draupadi to Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi (Draupadi), who is named after mythological Draupadi, the story is all the same. What is the common thread that binds Draupadi and Dopdi? What is the crime committed by these two women? In a quick analysis, there is nothing much in common between these two women, except their gender. But an in-depth study of their characters reveal a lot of common traits including their individuality, strength of character, unwillingness to yield, will power and determination. These are ordinary women but the circumstances impose on them an undaunted and

ferocious nature and thereby they question the male authority, arrogance and their regardlessness for gender parity. Draupadi is a queen who is known for her charm whereas Dopdi is an illiterate tribal woman, who is born and brought up in an extremely backward countryside in India. Their 'crimes' are different too. Vyasa's Draupadi "committed the crime of laughing at Duryodhana's confusion in the Pandava's palace of Maya. Moreover, she commits the 'grave mistake' of discoursing on legal technicalities like a lady pandit and questioning the stalwarts of wisdom" (Sen and Yadav 244). Dopdi Meihen, on the other hand, chooses to be a naxalite, engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Though both commit their 'crimes' in two different time frames, when it comes to the result, "Both Draupadi and Dopdi, therefore, are punished by the attempted stripping of one and the multiple rape of another" (Sen and Yadav 244).

In spite of all the cruel attacks on their womanhood and their right for existence, they remain stronger to voice their protest against those who use their power and might to crush their lives. "In another level, the gang rape of Draupadi is counterpoised against Draupadi's polyandry in the epic. A radical similarity is suggested in reading Draupadi's marriage like a gang rape. Can it be seen as a comment on the forced nature of the arrangement in the epic, in which the pragmatic decision is made which compels Draupadi to be a wife to and thereby sexually service five brothers, supposedly to keep them united?" (Sen and Yadav 252)

Reality: In recent years, real life extensions of Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi are seen through the lives of women like Manorama Devi of Manipur, ChuniKotal of West Bengal and SoniSori of Chattisgarh. These women have won national and international attention through the way they suffered assaults of the male dominated society, which has least concern for basic rights of human beings. While going deep into their sufferings and resistance, striking similarities are evident between them and the literary characters mentioned above by Vyasa and Devi. The bitter experiences they suffer force us to reach at the conclusion that the honour of women is at stake across the country in all ages irrespective of their class, caste, and creed, social or economic backgrounds.

It was in 2004, 32-year-old Thangjam Manorama Devi was taken into custody by Assam Rifles from her Imphal residence in a late night operation. On the allegations of being a member of Manipur's banned People's Liberation Army (PLA), her dead body was found near her home the very next day. The bullet-riddled body had signs of torture and rape. An in depth study of Manorama's boldness even at the jaws

of death and the audacious feminine fury of the women who defied the army reveal a strong resemblance to Draupadi, the iconic woman character of Mahasweta Devi. Like Draupadi, Manorama too is dragged and beaten up. Her hands and legs are tied up and is repeatedly gang raped. Dopdi survives all the brutal attacks on her body by the police. Finally, she strips and uses her nakedness as a weapon to fight the distorted way of law enforcement by the forces. It was a single woman's fight using her naked body. Likewise Vyasa's Draupadi also walks with unkempt and unknotted hair. It is true that Manorama of our days is not able to challenge the brutalities by waking up against her oppressors like in the case of Vyasa's Draupadi or Devi's Dopdi. But retaliation emerges in a different form and magnitude on July 15, 2004, when 30 women over the age of 40 identify themselves as Manorama or who call each other as "mothers of Manorama" (Srivastava 203) parade naked, shouting slogans "Indian Army, rape us too" in defense of the dead Manorama to shame her humiliators. These women also use their nudity as a tool to mount world opinion against one of the most brutal examples of State terror. In both these cases, humiliators try to dishonour the modesty of women by using rape as a tool. But for these women, nakedness is not turning a matter of shame but a powerful tool for them to fight back. who has been traumatized by the police terming her a Naxal sympathizer. It is a matter of irony that the Naxals had attacked some of her close relatives charging them as agents of police. Soni Sori episode tells us how Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi is getting a rebirth in the Naxal hinterlands of India's so called "red corridor"(Pandita 10) where the ultra revolutionaries and the State forces are engaged in a primitive war. Women are the worst sufferers in such internal wars of the country and several Dopdi's are being forced to suffer the callousness of police and authorities. Their lives are getting caught in the vortex of attacks by both ultras and men in uniform. Both have the least concern for human rights and dignity of life.

Thirty years after *Draupadi* has been published, newspapers have reported about the sufferings of Soni Sori, the most resembling character to Draupadi. Soni Sori, a 35 year old tribal school teacher and warden of a government school from Chhattisgarh, who fought to get minimum wages for the tribals and for the rights of mine workers, has been tortured and brutally gang raped by the Chhattisgarh police. She was arrested on 4th October 2011 on charges of collecting money for Naxals or Maoists. Soni Sori's letter sneaked out from jail and got published, reads so: "When I was being stripped, I wished someone would come and save me. But this did not happen. In

Mahabharata, when Draupadi's honour was at stake, she saved herself by calling upon Krishna. Whom should I have called? It was the courts, themselves, who handed me over to the police. Today, I will not ask you to save my honour because I have nothing left. Yes, but I do want to know from all of you — why was I tortured?

The questions raised by Soni Sori can be compared to that of Vyasa's Draupadi in Mahabharata. In both cases, people with power and position are liable to answer the question of why they are being tortured. Further more, in this very unique case, Soni Sori resembles Draupadi while the police officer is turning a copy cat of the Senanayak in Devi's story.

Like Draupadi, Soni Sori is also challenging the attempts of authorities to lighten the magnitude of atrocities on her by branding her a Naxal sympathizer. "By giving me (electric) current, by stripping me naked, or by brutally assaulting me by inserting stones in my rectum – will the problem of Naxalism end? Why so many atrocities on women? I want to know from all my countrymen" — Soni Sori. The brutalities bore by Soni Sori very much resembles Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi. These words of Soni Sori reminds us of Draupadi's question addressed to Senanayak "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (37). Both these women could not be defeated by the gang rape, torture and assault but instead, they emerge stronger and question the authority and are living to tell the tale.

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