

Scripting Resistance through ‘Body’ to decenter “gendered” Subaltern: A study of Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi”

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Mahasweta Devi, through her short stories, showcases the long suppressed voices of the marginalized. Her writings are the truthful portrayal of the brutal oppression of the tribal people and the untouchables by the upper-class landlords, money-lenders, and government officers. Devi, in her short story “Draupadi,” rewrites the myth of ‘disrobing Draupadi’ of Mahabharata in the present day context, where Draupadi becomes Dopdi Mejhen- a Santhal Naxal activist voicing against her double marginalization by virtue of her caste and gender. Devi’s Dopdi, like Gramsci’s “organic intellectual,” tries to give voice against the atrocities and oppression of the authority. Subverting the pretensions of welfare nationalism, Devi’s work focuses on the gap or void in Indian feminism and dalit activism as neither of them has addressed the concerns of the tribal women. Like “Choli ke Peeche,” Devi’s “Draupadi” also portrays the dichotomy existing between modernization of state and restricted subaltern existence. She addresses how mainstream hegemonic power structure of patriarchal society as well as welfare state protects itself through cruel and vicious ‘othering’ of those on the margins. Devi says in her introduction to *Five Plays*,

A responsible writer, standing at turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him ... I desire a transformation of the present social system. After thirty one year of independence, I find myself still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writings ... Hence I go on writing to the best of my ability about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame. (viii-ix)

Dopdi, in the story “Draupadi,” is a revised and de-mythicised manifestation of the epical Draupadi who belongs to a world where multiple subalternization is a normal framework of the existing power structure. Devi portrays the inhuman treatment of the naxal tribe by the very law makers and law protectors. Spivak comments in the Foreword of her translation of “Draupadi,”

The story is a moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the other hand, a law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression, on the other, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles (*Critical inquiry* 386).

In the story we get the information that Dopdi Mejhen is in the list of wanted persons who had killed the mistress' husband, Surja Sahu, a land-owning money-lender, because he refuses to share water with the untouchables. A reward of two hundred rupees is announced for her head. Dopdi herself has seen that notice at the Panchayat office. When warned by Mushai Tudu's wife that Government has declared two hundred rupees reward for her arrest, she replies, "Go home. I don't know what will happen. If they catch me don't know me" (397). Mr. Senanayak takes responsibility to track them down and successfully corners Dopdi in the evening. She is kept at the canvas-camp till the dinner time. Senanayak who poses himself to be third world intellectual permits the officials to do whatever they like. Her hands and legs are tied to four posts. She becomes unconscious. In the morning, she is brought to the tent. On seeing the General, the dishonored Dopdi walks towards him to exhibit what has happened to her. Devi unfolds the condition of Dopdi after rape:

Then a billion moon pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years. Draupadi strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says "water" she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make?"(401)

Unlike Mahabharata's Draupadi who was saved by Lord Krishna, Dopdi gets disrobed in the dark, dreaded wild forest where no male power saves her rather she becomes an object to the authority. Dopdi is apprehended, tortured, gang raped, all through night thus, the system proves its power over the female body. But Dopdi changes the meaning of "sexual assault," nakedness, shame, loss, fear which has been symbolically working as apparatus for 'power.' Dopdi ironically deconstructs the semiotics of these signs to question the power of patriarchy.

Unlike Draupadi-like feminine figure, Dopdi denied the patriarchal morality lest it subjugates her into passive submission, and thus she redefines the patriarchal cultural semiotic of 'sexual honor' of a woman. Draupadi, in the ancient Hindu epic Mahabharata, is the example of a woman who is married off to several men. This legitimatization of Draupadi's pluralized wedding is an instance of the glorification of patriarchy. But Dopdi – unlike her counterpart, Draupadi, who is bound to the patriarchal ideology in the epic – manages to disentangle herself from the chains of patriarchal shame, humiliation, and victimization. Dopdi does not seek any benign Krishna to come and clothe her, and save her honor. Instead, she wages war upon her tormentors by refusing to cover her naked body.

In the General's tent, Dopdi displays how the welfare state's protectors have made her 'civilized' by tearing her body and soul apart:

Draupadi stands up...Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth ... Senanayak ... sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up; don't you want to see how they made me? (402)

Covering her naked body by herself would have been a reinforcement of the man-made morality on her part which she does not want to give. Thus, Dopdi challenges Senanayak to "kounter" her instead of lamenting at the loss of the suppressed "respectability." She questions 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?

When Senanayak asks her to get dressed, she objects to take the essential needs of human being of being covered. Unlike Draupadi, she totally refuses to become a part of submissive or passive, but proposes herself on a different level. She transforms her shame as her strength. She defies the docility of being poor, tribal, and/or a woman. She refuses to act like an inferior stereotyped female gender.

For Senanayak, Dopdi is the quintessence of negativity. She is nothing more than a "brute" who, can't be "dispatched" by the "approved" process i.e. brutality and torture. On the other hand, Senanayak believes that he has the "proper perspective" about the "credentials" that require surviving with honour in the world. And as mirroring the same "white man's burden" to civilize the tribal, he must act rather he should act through "apprehension and elimination" of the tribal rebels. Senanayak basically considers himself to be a saviour that possesses the power to destroy the enemy and deliver the present world's "legacy" into the youth's hands (394). But he fails to understand that the very identity of his position of power is structured through a negative relationship to the mutilated figure of Dopdi. The "lesson of blood" that he wants the youth to remember is, in fact, impossible to imbibe without reference to the defiled body of Dopdi. At the end of the story, Senanayak is forced to confront his powerlessness in the presence of a naked Dopdi. It is an easy task for Senanayak to have Dopdi's body forcibly disrobed, raped, and mutilated. However, he does not possess the power to cover the marks of violence inflicted upon Dopdi: "Draupadi pushes Senananayak with her mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed, terribly afraid" (402).

Dopdi, a powerless tribal woman, challenges the entire power of a ruthless postcolonial state represented by Senanayak like intellectuals. By denying her femininity she thus, destroys the binary opposition between oppressors and oppressed, between object and subject. Her

empowerment shocks the General as it questions the very validity of masculinity. Spivak writes that the illiterate and low-born woman teaches the male officials a shocking lesson by posing a formidable threat to entire patriarchal identity. They don't have the courage to face the "Unarmed target":

It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject" who, still using the language of sexual "honor", can derisively call herself "the object of your search," whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object - "an unarmed target." (388)

The strong-willed lady indirectly questions their power. Her "Power over" structure makes her dominate the scene. Senanayak thinks that Dopdi would never be in position to talk again after being gang raped. But Dopdi retaliates with her naked body which defies the sense of honor sanctioned by the patriarchy. They can rape her, but they cannot stop her from remaining naked after the rape. Further the critic voices:

The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi – in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is a place where male leadership stops. (388)

Devi, through Dopdi in "Draupadi" or Gangor in "Choli Ke Peeche," deconstructs the norms of male superiority which were based on the traditional sexuality. According to Butler, gender identity is simply "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of (*Gender Trouble*, 33). As a result of that we are often conditioned to think or assume gender identities as natural and essential which prevents us to see the gender politics. For Butler, one of the most important objectives of a feminist is to challenge the dominant gender norms by exposing the conditional acts that produce the appearance of an underlying 'natural' gender identity. Dopdi's acceptance of being naked is the metaphorical attack on the norms of sexuality. Butler suggests that:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, made subjects, a new configuration of politics world surely emerge from the ruins of the old. (149).

She topples the male discourse of power upside down by challenging the legitimacy of hegemonic power structure between subject and object. As Spivak notes Dopdi 'acts in not acting', and disapproves her oppressor by overturning his plan to subjugate her mind, body, and soul. By refusing to accept her 'dishonour,' Dopdi declines to affirm the 'manhood' of the patriarchal agency yearning to cage her sexuality and political freedom. Devi presents a dystopian critical perspective of the tribal world marginalized by imperialism. Dopdi uses her defencelessness as a counter offensive against the state and disrupts their hegemonic social

structures. She mocks at their incapacity to face the “unarmed target.” Conquering her pain and humiliation, she resurrects as the most powerful ‘subject.’ 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 emphasises on the truth of her own presence. She constructs a meaning which Senanayak will never understand. She counters male knowledge, power and glory, and finally destroys it. For asserting her identity, Dopdi does not need any miracle of Lord Krishna to cover her body. Denying the body politics, Dopdi celebrates her femininity.

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