

RESURRECTING SUBALTERN THROUGH FEMALE BODY - IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "DRAUPADI"

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Abstract

Indian literature is abundant in the projection of consignment of women's servitude and inhuman treatment of men. It raises the voice of resistance against patriarchal oppression in society in order to emancipate women with dignity and identity. It also focuses in the reconstruction of womanhood which emphasizes on the reordering of social and family relationship with financial independability of women. Mahasweta Devi's text makes great areas of feminist research and also involves with the lives and struggles of the unprivileged tribal women. The present paper aims to analyze the contours of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" where a tribal woman Draupadi is subjected to third degree in sexual violence. Mahasweta Devi alleges that women should be judged from the point of view of a human and not from the point of view of gender, race, caste and class She portrays the true face of feminist assertion where Draupadi use her wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized identity.

Keywords: Sexual violence, Subaltern, Identity

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is probably the most widely translated Indian writer while working in an indigenous language today. She is the foremost living writer in Bengali. She has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing. She has spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of West Bengal and the southeast of Bihar as a political anthropologist. She was born in 1926 to urban, middle-class, professional writer. Mahasweta has written hundred books to her credit, including novels, plays and collection of stories. Devi becomes more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the unprivileged tribal woman and the atrocities inflicted on them. Unlike other Bengali authors, Mahasweta Devi's works have been translated into many languages. She has received many awards, including *Sahitya Academy (1979)*, *Jnanpith (1996)*, *Ramon Magsaysay (1996)*, and her work among tribal's, *the Padmashree* in 1986. Devi used the imaginary space of fiction to begin a conversation about and a conversation with the very real people on the ground that had been neglected all this while. Her works hints at a particular kind of change in the discourse of sexuality where it no longer oppresses the marginalized women but becomes the very ground of political liberation. In her famous work short story "Draupadi", about the rape and mutilation of a tribal woman called Dopdi, the protagonist threatens the masculinities of her oppressors by refusing to be ashamed of her mutilated body forcing them to survey her nakedness with a defiance that exhibits her power and autonomy. Her work profusely on the issues of mainstream development and critiqued the trickle-down theory. Her work is important to understand subaltern politics and their struggles too visiblized their invisiblized exploitation. She is comfortable leading the processions of the people fighting for the rights o bounded laborers as she is behind her desk writing about these struggles. Devi, the activist, has been constantly involved in varied struggles and was a part of several associations in spite of the demands of her increasing age. Spivak, in her essay has created a critical discourse around Mahasweta Devi from the postcolonial subaltern perspective. Spivak's critique emerges as a means of both understanding and combating the oppression of such indigenous people to whom she refers to as the "subaltern" and the "forth world". Spivak theorizes the characters of the tribal men and women in Mahasweta's text as "subaltern".

The term 'subaltern' owes its origins to Antonio Gramsci's writings and underlines a subordinate position in terms of class, caste, race, and culture. It was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled, "can the subaltern speak?"(1985). 'Subaltern' and 'Feminist' histories, among others, constitute some of the dominant historiographical positions that deconstruct the mainstream to decentre it and reinvest the historical space with the voices of the marginal's.

Draupadi is translated by Gayatri Spivak. It opens with an ironic counter pointing of different modes of official discourse through which the central character, a tribal woman called Dopdi Mejhen. Devi's Draupadi is a unique reaction of the Draupadi of the Mahabharata. One of the purana has the following verse:

"In the Kritar Yuga Renuka was Kritya,
In the satya Yuga Sita was Kritya,
In the satya Dwaparyuga Draupadi was Kritya
And in Kalyugas there are Krityas in every house"

Draupadi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. The character Dopdi is a recreation of Draupadi of the epic and unlike a 'Kritya' Here through Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi has tried to raise certain question of responsibility, as she herself demands certain political responses from us and she also want to understand something about the revolution that Dopdi is fighting for us. Dopdi is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman.. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Being a tribal means that she is not considered as a part of mainstream Indian society. She portrayed woman-power through analyzing the situations and imperative to know the different structures of power. None is powerless. All living organisms exercise power to enjoy a meaningful and comfortable life; however, the degree of usage may be different. In Devi's story it is not male leadership but Draupadi's strength and courage to challenge the patriarchy that brings resolution to the story. Devi understood the essence of *rape culture*, long before the term became famous in feminist jargon.

Keywords: tribal woman, power, struggles,

Discussion

Draupadi is represented before us, between two versions of name Dopdi (tribal name) and Draupadi (classical ancient name). The tribalized form Dopdi is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi. At the close of the story, she becomes the object of her feelings, instead of simply being viewed as the 'other' portrayed as the object of male desires and fears. Dopdi, in her story "Draupadi" is a revised and demythicised incarnation of the epical Draupadi who belongs to the Santhal tribe. In her reincarnation, she is placed within contemporary historical contexts where ancestry is treated to Champabhumi of Bengal and her present status is describe to that of an activist the naxalite movement of the seventies, in the area of the northern part of West Bengal, a fugitive on the run from the police. Dopdi as a woman belonging of the lowest of the low economic class, she is subjected to double subalternization. Mahasweta Devi, once again, inverts and revises the legacy of cultural nationalism by reinterpreting the story of the most powerful female character of Mahabharata, Draupadi, in her story "Draupadi". She displaces Draupadi from her place in royal kingdom to put her into the forest area of the Jharkhani belt as a tribal woman. Dopdi gets disrobed in the dark, dreaded, wild world of a forest where no divine male power comes to her rescue. She is in a place and situation where she must act for herself. Force, physical violence, verbal abuse and other forms of aggressions have always been used to control women's bodies and gain their obedience. It is always 'the female body 'which is both the object of desire and the subject of control.

“Draupadi” is set in the villages and forests of West Bengal and follows the lives of a group of rebels, poor landless laborers and exploited workers who are being pursued by the police and Special Forces. The latter have few scruples in using any and all means of intimidating these rebels and they are subjected to various forms of torture and eventually, inevitably, killed in ‘encounters’ and ‘accidents’. Draupadi, the central figure in the tale is shown as proud and strong and in spite of repeated rape, abuse, starvation and acute thirst she faces down her tormentors, her bloody, mutilated body naked but unbowed. The narrative voice in the story shifts to take up various viewpoints: that of the rebels, of Draupadi specifically of Senanayak and so on. Draupadi and her husband, Dulna, first turned to violence, their activities subsequent to that and the death of Dulna.

“Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood.No doubt it is she who is saying the fugitives now.

They’ is also a hypothesis.

Why?

How many went originally?”(pg 164)

Resistance through female body is the tale of Draupadi out performs that of the epic in terms of the navages are used as well as the reaction displayed by the victim. Unlike her mythological namesake, Dopdi doesn’t seek any divine intervention. The place of Dopdi’s defiance is not the court of a ‘Maharaja’; it is the wild space of a forest. Dopdi gets no divine male rescuer. The custodians of low offer a piece of cloth to hide her shame after subjecting her to multiple-rape throughout the night. Dopdi pours down the water, tears the cloth to pieces and refuses to cover herself up with the male -defined notions of „shame“ and „female modesty“. Covering herself up would have been a reaffirming and a fortification of the man made morality preserved and sanctified by the patriarchal ideologies constructs of „female honor“ and „breach of woman’s modesty and her subject hood“. According to Spivak, Dopdi “acts in „not acting“”. (In Other Worlds95). However, the effectiveness of Dopdi’s resistance is not the refusal to act, but the refusal to act predictably. She redefines the construct of “sexual honour” of a woman when she comes out naked and confronts Senanayak. Unlike the mythological Draupadi, she resists guilt, fear, shame or servility that are typically associated with the discourse of her “making”(in shame and servility), Dopdi challenges the brutalizer to “kounter” her and instead of lamenting at the loss of the supposed “respectability”, 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 to spit a bloody gab at and says, there isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, Kounter me- Come on, Kounter me-? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid”. (pg165)

Dopdi’s action totally dislocates and belittles the disciplined “resistance” displayed by Draupadi’s lamentations as she attempts to awaken the masculine powers of the great patriarchs in the grand epical narrative.In a stunning transformation the powerless tribal woman challenges the entire power of a ruthless postcolonial state embodied in figure of Senanayak. Draupadi confronts Senanayak, denigrates his false masculinist pride and challenges him to „Kounter“ her Draupadi looks like a victim but acts like an agent. Indeed, the binary of victim and agent falls apart as Draupadi effectively separates violation from victimhood. As she stands insistently naked before her violators, Dopdi manages to wield her wounded body as a weapon to terrify them. By refusing the disciplining power of shame scripted into the act of rape, Draupadi becomes, in the

words of Mahasweta Devi's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a "terrifying super object".(Spivak 1988,184).

Conclusion

The tribal woman is marginalized in more than one way as she lives in a constant fear of victimization. The re-presentation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts: the subaltern woman can be represented in imaginative writing and she can be represented as an "agent". In this scene Mahasweta Devi's short story effectively dismantles Spivak's contention in her essay "can the subaltern speak?" that "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (1994:104). In Dopdi we have a subaltern woman who speaks loudly and highlight the strength that walked shoulder to shoulder in these insurgencies.

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