Volume 21 Issue 33
Originally issued as H5

Global Journal of human-social science: H Interdisciplinary
Volume 21 Issue 5 Version 1.0 Year 2021
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460x & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

From Dopdi to Draupadi, from Oppression to Empowerment: Reading Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi"

By Somjeeta Pandey & Bidhu Chand Murmu

Abstract- The subaltern stories by Mahasweta Devi, by refusing to conform to the conventions of the Indian literary canon have blatantly exposed the grim realities of the interplay of caste and class in the fabric of Indian society and as Rangrao Bhongle rightly asserts "have projected an unknown facet of social reality in the Indian context." The paper seeks to study "Draupadi", a short story by Mahashweta Devi and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1988, which recreates the episode of The Mahabharata in which Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, was asked to be stripped naked but was finally saved by Lord Krishna. Draupadi (Dopdi) Mejhen, the leader of Operation Bakuli in the story is caught by the police and raped by many. While no God comes to save her, she at the end derives strength from her naked body and finally stands as an empowered woman, a "terrifying superobject" (Spivak), in front of Senanayak the man who sanctioned her rape and who stands like an "unarmed target" (Spivak) in a state of paralysis.

Keywords: *dalit, empowerment, nakedness, oppression.*

GJHSS-H Classification: *FOR Code: 330205*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

© 2021. Somjeeta Pandey & Bidhu Chand Murmu. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

From Dopdi to Draupadi, from Oppression to Empowerment: Reading Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi"

Somjeeta Pandey [α] & Bidhu Chand Murmu [σ]

Abstract- The subaltern stories by Mahasweta Devi, by refusing to conform to the conventions of the Indian literary canon have blatantly exposed the grim realities of the interplay of caste and class in the fabric of Indian society and as Rangrao Bhongle rightly asserts "have projected an unknown facet of social reality in the Indian context." The paper seeks to study "Draupadi", a short story by Mahashweta Devi and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1988, which recreates the episode of *The Mahabharata* in which Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, was asked to be stripped naked but was finally saved by Lord Krishna. Draupadi (Dopdi) Mejhen, the leader of Operation Bakuli in the story is caught by the police and raped by many. While no God comes to save her, she at the end derives strength from her naked body and finally stands as an empowered woman, a "terrifying superobject" (Spivak), in front of Senanayak the man who sanctioned her rape and who stands like an "unarmed target" (Spivak) in a state of paralysis. The paper will try to focus on the oppression of Dalit women and will throw light on their subjugation which exists at multiple levels – for being a woman, for being a Dalit woman, for belonging to the lowest strata of the societal hierarchy. For instance, exploitation takes a new face when Draupadi gets caught only because two of the Dalit men of her group had deceived her by giving her information to the police. The paper will also focus on how nakedness becomes, as Deepti Misri writes, "intelligible as a feminist mode of protest against the violence of the Indian state." The paper will further evaluate how through these writings, Devi is flagrantly contesting the caste and class prejudices that the Indian society reeks of.

Keywords: dalit, empowerment, nakedness, oppression.

Introduction

"Draupadi", a short story by Mahasveta Devi, translated by Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, first appeared in *Agnigarbha* ("Womb of Fire", 1978). May 25, 1967 saw the uprising of a peasant rebellion, which began with the slogan "land to tiller", in Jote village in Naxalbari, West Bengal. This movement spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes including tribal cultivators. The coalition between the peasants and the intellectuals gave birth to a number of naxalbaris all over India. These movements intended to free the peasants of the oppression and in the process they received the aid of the Naxalites. But in 1970, East and West Pakistan indulged in an armed struggle. After the defeat of West Pakistan, the Indian Prime Minister was able to cut down on the Naxalites in 1971 because they supposedly had alliances with the freedom fighters of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). The rural people, especially the tribals, suffered the most.

Such is the backdrop of "Draupadi". Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen, a twenty-seven-year- old Santhal woman is introduced to us through the conversation between two "liveried uniforms". As Spivak writes in the foreword:

> She (Draupadi) is introduced to the reader...between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name (Draupadi), or the trivialized form, Dopdi, is the proper name of the ancient Dopdi. (Spivak, 387)

Dopdi Mejhen is in the list of wanted people. Now what might possibly be the reason behind this? The reason is that she and husband Dulna had escaped after murdering Surja Sahu and his son during Operation Bakuli. Thus, Dopdi and Dulna's escape increased the blood sugar level of Captain Arjan Singh. The police along with the Special Forces had tried and, in the process, had killed quite a few Santhals because "all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the Special Forces." (Devi, 393)

In a pointblank way, Devi starts the story. But one cannot obviously miss the underlying satiric attack on the social situaton. From the very beginning we are given an insight into the oppression the santhalsface. They are untouchables, dark-skinned people who, being denied access to drinking water during the drought, had killed the upper-caste people. The Special Forces had killed many santhals in the attempt of catching hold of Dulna and Dopdi as their complexions made differentiation difficult. The killing of these santhals was passed off as mere accidents. As Devi writes:

> By the Indian Constitution, all human beings, regardless of caste or creed, are sacred. Still, accidents like this do happen. (Devi, 393)

One important point is to be noted here. Dalits refer to those people who were outside the fourfold Hindu *Varna* system. Literally *Varna* means colour, and it was a fourfold framework to classify people and was

Author α: Assistant Professor of English, Gobardanga Hindu College, India. e-mail: somjeeta072@gmail.com
Author σ: Assistant Professor of English, Ramkrishna Mission Residential College, India. e-mail: murmubidhu@gmail.com

© 2021 Global Journals

generally used in the Vedic Indian society. The four classes included Brahmins who were the upper-caste priestly people, the Kshatriyas who were the administrators, rulers or warriors, the Vaishyas who were artisans, tradesmen, merchants and farmers and the Shudras who were the labouring classes. The *Varna* implicitly referred to another fifth group who were completely excluded from the fourfold system and they were the untouchables or the Dalits. With the emergence of Hinduism, the caste system became fixed and hereditary. The laws of Manu (*Manusmriti),* which date roughly back to the 3rd century AD uphold and preach the sanctity of the *Varnas* and also strictly inject the principles of rank and gradation. *Manusmriti* teaches the servility and impurity of the untouchables and uphold the view that Brahmans are the purest of all and they have the right to dominate the other groups. As a result, atrocities were exercised on the untouchables saying that they had a sinful past. For a long time the untouchables faced the oppression and therefore the dalit protests in the 20th century were explained as a reaction to the prejudiced Hindu caste system. Sociologists claimed that the dalit protests were due to the relative deprivation of the untouchables. But not even relative deprivation is enough to explain the protests of the dalits. Dalits were not allowed access to natural resources. Even in this story, dalits are shown as being excluded from the social circles as well as not allowed to use tubewells and wells during the time of drought. This is not just a relative deprivation but an instance of alienation and isolation. The dalits, even after being pushed to the outskirts of societal circles are not even allowed to eat or drink peacefully in order to sustain their lives. They have been completely excluded from the society as well as the natural resources like water and land. This is worse than a case of just relative deprivation. The brutal atrocities exercised over the dalits by the upper castes compel the dalits to protest in the most dangerous ways. Darupadi and her rebellious partners had not only killed SurjaSahu who had denied them access to water but had risen in protest with weapons like scythe, bow and arrow.

The treatment of the santhals might subtly suggest the danger that is looming large in Dopdi's fate. We are introduced to Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics. He is a man who has the capacity to understand and comprehend the activities of the opposition. He feels that it is the duty of every soldier to destroy fighters fighting with scythe, bow and arrow (Dopdi belongs to this category). Although this is his practice, in theory he respects his opposition. He believes that in order to catch hold of the enemy he needs to become one with the enemy. Thus he orders his men to hide in the Jharkhani forest so that they can easily hunt down Dulna and Dopdi. Many santhals get killed and their body parts become the food of fox, vulture and other maneaters.

While this search for these defiant, hungry untouchables goes on we are introduced to Dopdi Mejhen. A santhal woman, headstrong and rebellious, she comes to know from Mushai Tudu that the policemen have set a reward for finding her out. But she cannot be cowed down. She has the true spirit of a leader: "What will they do if they counter me? They will counter me. Let them." (Devi, 397) As she proceeds towards the Jharkhani forest, a flavour of the santhal life is presented to us through her reminiscences:

> Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They always stood guard over their women's blood in black armour. (Devi, 399)

Although two of her partners, Shomai and Budhna, had deceived them yet she was sure that "they were half-breeds...Otherwise, crow would eat crow's flesh before Santal would betray Santal." (Devi, 399) Infact their lifestyles are also primitive in nature. They use medicinal herbs to cure scorpion bite.

But very soon she is caught. Dopdi becomes the prey of the deception of her partners. Senanayak's reading of *First Blood* had helped him in anticipating her move – an intellectual with literative sensibilities, he felt overwhelmed with his success. Afterwards she is brought to the camp and questioned for exactly one hour. After her encounter is over, the well-read, sensible, simple Senanayak said "Make her. Do the needful." (Devi, 401) After that she is tied to four posts and raped continuously for days.

Hundreds of years ago, Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad and wife of the five sons of the impotent Pandu was asked to be stripped. As Spivak writes in the foreward:

> Within a patriarchal and patronymic context, she is exceptional, indeed "singular" in the sense of odd, unpaired, uncoupled. Her husbands...are legitimately pluralized...Mahasweta's story questions this "singularity" by placing Dopdi first in a comradely, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. (Spivak, 387)

In a game of dice, her eldest husband loses his possessions and Draupadi being one of those possessions, loses her too. As Spivak quotes from *The Mahabharata* (65:35-36):

> The Scriptures prescribed one husband for a woman, Draupadi is dependent on many husbands; therefore she can be designated a prostitute. There is nothing improper in bringing her, clothed or unclothed, into the assembly. (Spivak, 388)

She is dragged to the court by her hair and Dushana is ordered by Duryodhana to disrobe her. Draupadi helplessly and silently prays to Krishna and while Dushana pulls and pulls at her sari, there seems to be more and more of it. Draupadi is miraculously abundantly and endlessly clothed and Dushana is

© 2021 Global Journals

himself forced to stop due to exhaustion. Draupadi is thus saved by Krishna's miracle.

Many years after *The Mahabharata* was written, another Draupadi emerges in Devi's story but Draupadi is not a royal persona and is not involved in a polygamous marriage yet she becomes the victim of exploitation. As many critics have pointed out that, swinging between two names (Draupadi and Dopdi) she becomes a recreation of the famous Draupadi of the epic who was saved from being disrobed. In the third part of the story, unlike in the first two parts, she is addressed as Draupadi and not Dopdi. But unfortunately, no Krishna nor any other God comes to saves her. She is brutally and ruthlessly raped:

> Draupadi . . . Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood . . . Incredible thirst. . . She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? (Devi, 401)

She is shamed, tears fall from her eyes. A rebel, a true leader, stands haplessly tied to a post with her pride wounded and her body torn and deteriorated. Her fault is that she is a Dalit woman. An article titled "Dalit Women" published in International Dalit Solidarity Network states that Dalit women suffer at the hands of upper-caste members:

> Dalit women are therefore considered easy targets for sexual violence and other crimes, because the perpetrators almost get away with it. For example, in India, studies show that the conviction rate for rapes against Dalit women is under 2% compared to a conviction rate of 25% in rape cases against all women in India.

The aforementoined article also quotes an incident and a reply of an Indian court judge:

> "Great, now you have proof you enjoyed yourself" -the reply of an Indian court judge to a gang raped Dalit woman, upon seeing a video filmed and distributed by the dominant caste rapists and presented by the woman in court as an evidence of rape.

Thus, Draupadi Mejhen, is not just one woman who has become a victim of multiple rape but she has become a victim to the jaundiced societal rules which allow people to get away with such heinous crimes. Devi states in the beginning of her story:

> . . .in this India of ours, even a worm is under a certain police station. (Devi, 393)

Unfortunately, the saviours are no more saviours here in the story. The inhuman treatment of Draupadi is just an example of such crimes being committed on women since ages. Draupadi, then, becomes the apotheosis of the tortured and oppressed Dalit women who are exploited mainly because they are black-skinned and untouchables. Draupadi Mejhen was someone who had mustered enough courage to raise her voice against the oppression inflicted by the upper-class members. While the primitive Santhals, the illiterate, uneducated Santhals stood guard over their women's modesty, the literate, educated corrupt officers, like Senanayak, infiltrates violence. Whatever his ideas and thoughts be, he is just another agent of patriarchal and dominance and he uses his superiority well by asking his men to "make her (Draupadi)".

However, Draupadi's rape fails in oppressing her and it rather strengthens her. When she is finally released and asked to wear her cloth and go to Senanayak's tent, she refuses to be clothed:

> Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. (Devi, 402)

The guards become alarmed, seeing such a peculiar behaviour of Draupadi. They are at a loss as they do not know how to control a prisoner who behaves 'incomprehensibly'. Even Senanayak is taken aback when he finds Draupadi approaching towards him, naked with her "thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds." She is no more the oppressed Dalit woman. Her body has been injured and wounded, she has been shamed but there cannot be any further damage that can be done to her. She approaches Senanayak and asks him, laughing:

> The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? (Devi, 402)

Many crtics have pointed out this transformation of Draupadi is a symbol of her empowerment. For example, E.S. Latha in "Political Suppression in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" writes:

> At first, it is a sense of shame that pervades her. But soon she, her tough spirits make her realise that her body is her weapon and her voice. Deprived of everything in life, she has to hold on to her physical self, which alone is her sole possession. . . she realises that there is nothing for her to be ashamed about because, it is an immoral act practised on herby men who profess to be guardians of women's chastity.

Draupadi Mejhen's body, which had become the easy target of the corrupt men, finally emerges as her weapon that gives her immense strength and courage to laugh at the masculinity of the officers. She knows that no more harm can be caused to her because the extreme form of punishment she could have received for being a Dalit woman and a rebel has already been implemented on her – rape. Having been easily stripped off her clothes, she has nothing else to be afraid of. She derives strength from her torn body and shamed pride and says:

> What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man? (Devi, 402)

Her body is bleeding but her courage remains unaffected, her feminine nakedness standing as a guard against any further shaming of her. Rape of women, especially the Dalit women, was a form of suppression used by the state authorities to crush down their

© 2021 Global Journals

revolutionary spirits. Another critic, Lakshmi R.Nair, shares the same view in her article titled "Dismantling Theory of Rejection to Resistance: Dalit Feminist Consciousness in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi":

> "Draupadi" depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body and inner feminine core to fight against her marginality. Here, the woman's body becomes an instrument of vicious denunciation of patriarchy and hegemony which are ironical, counter-canonical, anti-literary and contradictory.

After Draupadi decides to unveil herself and stand naked in front of Senanayak, she seems to be an empowered woman. Dr. Krishnaveni in an article "Draupadi – The symbol of Retaliation" quotes Miller and says that the change in Draupadi is only possible because of her empowerment:

> The term "empowerment" refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relation. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine access to resource and power, their empowerment begins when they recognize the systematic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships.

Unlike Draupadi of the epic who was saved by Lord Krishna, Draupadi Mejhen's tears remain unheeded to the Gods. No miracles save her. It is only when that she realizes that her oppression has reached its zenith and she cannot be degraded or exploited further, she becomes empowered by the strength of her feminine body, her nakedness:

> 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, counter me- come on, counter me - ? (Devi, 402

But is it only the upper-caste men who oppress the Dalit women? Although books like *Manusmriti* justifies the act of killing a Dalit woman by stating that it is equivalent to killing a minor animal. It explicitly states:

> A Brahman, Kshatriya or Vaishya man can sexually exploit any Shudra woman. (*Manusmriti* IX.25)

If such statements have already been made in texts that are so strictly followed by the Hindus, then no further explanation is needed for the exploitation faced by the Dalit women. All channels of upliftment of Dalit women had been closed. Dalit women faced a kind of double exploitation firstly because of their gender and secondly because of their social status. In Devi's story, Draupadi had gathered courage to rise in rebellion against their relative deprivation and social exclusion but was ultimately faced with the most torturous form of punishment – rape. But as I questioned earlier, is it only the upper-caste men who oppress and exploit Dalit women? I guess no. If we read the recollections of the past events as they flash in Draupadi's mind we would remember that Shomai and Budhna, two of their partners, had fled away by train. Draupadi shirks them off from her mind by calling them "half-breeds" (Devi, 399) because she believed that true Santhals never deceive their fellow men or women. Their treachery could prove dangerous because they knew everything about their forthcoming plans and Draupadi shifted her attention towards making changes in the places of their hideouts. But little did she know that their treachery would cost her a lot! The police succeeded in catching her and the credits went to Shomai and Budhna as they had not fled by train, they had stayed back to help the police in catching hold of the rebellious woman, Draupadi. What followed was just another example of the exploitation of Dalit women but the causes that led to such a shameful incident cannot and rather should not go unheeded. Dulna and Dopdi were the leaders of the Bakuli Operation. After killing Surja Sahu they had been constantly hiding from the police to save themselves and their fellow men but after Dulna's death, Dopdi became the leader of the group. Although she had all the qualities that a true leader should have yet she was deceived by two traitorous men of her own group, of her own caste. This might possibly mean that Shomai and Budhna did not want to be led by a woman even though she belonged to their clan. They did not want to be under the guidance of a woman who is generally epitomized as the tender and the second sex. Women have been denied access to any means that could elevate her status or uplift her in *Manusmriti* and especially the Dalit women face more exploitation than women of other upper-castes. But Devi's story shows another perspective also. Draupadi had faced the sexual oppression and abuse because of two Dalit men. Thus Draupadi had not only been marginalized and exploited by upper-caste officers but she had also faced marginalization by two of the members of her Dalit clan. It points out to another reality – the double marginalization of Dalit women, the first one being exercised by the upper-caste members and the second being implemented by the dalits themselves. When Draupadi stepped into her husband's shoes in order to lead as well as protect the other Dalit men, she was brought down to the ground by those whom she had wanted to protect. She had probably become oblivious of the fact that she was a woman whose duty is to remain submissive towards men instead of trying to save men from impending dangers. She had violated the norms of patriarchy by trying to become the leader of the Dalit men who were involved in Operation Bakuli. The Dalit men, Shomai and Budhna, were perhaps ready to be exploited by the upper-caste officers rather than being led by a woman. Draupadi had broken the patriarchal norms and she was aptly punished for that. This story although ends with Draupadi becoming an empowered woman yet the fact still remains that not only do the upper-caste members marginalize Dalit women but even the Dalit men do not lag behind in bringing about their downfall.

© 2021 Global Journals

In the end, Draupadi- a victim of gang rape and abuse ordained by the forces of the State that is supposed to punish such heinous crimes- draws power from her maimed body and strikes terror into the hearts of those very state forces. Deepti Misti argues:

> "The moment at which the raped subject refuses the obedient, shame-ridden femininity that is scripted for her is the moment when administrative masculinity falls apart, if only for a moment (606-7)."

Draupadi's indomitable spirit turns her nakedness and gang-raped body into a force that terrifies the State forces (Misri 608). Women's bodies have acted as sites of punishment, revenge and violence by state forces during wars, the partitions of nation-states witnessed in South Asia, and during protests and uprising by minority and marginalised forces. Mahasweta Devi's Draupaudi is subjected to the age-old punishment and vengeance meted out to dalit women by the State forces dominated by the upper castes, but the undefeated figure of Draupadi reminds the society of the times when the body of a woman have risen as form of feminist protests against the terrors of the State on marginalised communities.

Works Cited

1. Krishnaveni, R. "Draupadi – The Symbol of Retaliation." AJEL 1.1(2013): n.pag. Print.
2. Latha, E.S. "Political Suppression in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi." IRWLE 9.2 (2013): 1-6.Print.
3. Manu. 1920. *Manu Smriti: The laws of Manu with the Bhasya of Medhatithi*. Translated by Ganga Natha Jha. University of Calcutta, Calcutta, India.
4. Misri, Deepti. 2011. "'Are you a man?': Performing Naked Protest in India." *Signs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 603-625 Published by: The University of Chicago Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.108 /657487
5. Nair, Lakshmi R. "Dismantling Theory of Rejection to Resistance: Dalit Feminist Consciousness in Draupadi." IJELLH 3.1(2015): 489-496. Web.
6. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. ""Draupadi" by Mahasveta Devi." Critical Inquiry 8.2 (1981): 381-402. Web

© 2021 Global Journals