

# Deconstructing Patriarchy: Study of Mahashveta Devi's *Draupadi*

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India's literary tradition has a vast history, immense linguistic diversity and extensive variety of genres. Amid its huge corpus lies another emerging literary form called Tribal or 'Adivasi' Literature. Tribal literature has its roots in the earliest of Indian literatures and mythologies and has always been delivered orally among aboriginals' communities. However, the written versions came into vogue with the writers who have taken to write not only in tribal languages but in English too. Therefore, Tribal literature is old, rich, orally transferred literary tradition of a culture which may be thousands of years old but still full of vigour, colour and life. Mahashveta Devi, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar, Gita Mehta and some others are few Indian English writers who have dealt with the theme of Tribal India in their writings.

An eminent Bengali writer and social activist Mahashveta Devi is one of the few (Indian) women novelists and short story writers, who exactly knows how to draw her readers' attention. Her writing has filled a new life in Indian Literary world. Her work has inspired two generations of writers, film makers and journalists. As a social activist she has also worked for the rights and empowerment of many tribes of Indian sub continent.

Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 1926 and brought up in west Bengal, India, Mahashveta Devi was a descendant of literary parents and grandparents. Her father was a well-known Bengali author whose stories deals with slum life and her mother was a writer and social activist too who encouraged literacy among deprived and underprivileged children of society. In her elaborate Bengali fiction writings, she has often depicted the oppression and suppression of tribes and untouchables by authoritarians, upper caste land lords and government officials. She writes:

I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations...The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing. (Ghatak 2000)

Mahashweta Devi's short stories have been translated into English by renowned postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and published three books *Imaginary Maps*, *Old Woman* and *The Breast Stories*. Her major works include *Jhansi Rani*, *Hajar Churasir Maa*, *Agni Garbha*, *Murti*, *Neerte Megh*, *Stanyadayani*, *Chotti Munda*, *Evam Tar Tir* and others. She was honoured with various literary awards like Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award and India's civilian awards such as Padma Shri and Padma Vibhusan.

Like her own powerful image breaking self her women protagonists are also revolutionary figures. Although, they belong to the low strata of society but they know how and when to raise their voice for their rights. Her works demolish the dominant (patriarchal) symbols and myths embodied in Indian cultural-historical text, Upanishads, Vedas, Puranas and epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. She writes:

It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, Epics and Puranas interesting; I use them with a new interpretation. (UR17)

Her short story "Draupadi" first appeared in *Agni Garbha (Womb of Fires)*. Mahashweta devi has attempted to write an episode from the great Epic Mahabharata as a feminist response to the mythological figure Draupadi, with the idea to reinvent and deconstruct the historical representation of women and her stereotypical images through the ages. "Draupadi" by Mahashweta devi is a story of victimization of a tribal woman, Dopdi Majhen, who dared to confront the oppressive system of society. Dopdi along with her husband Dulna, has rebelled against the feudalistic-modernist patriarchal state and its allied system. During the period of drought, Surja Sahu (the feudal linchpin of the area in collusion with the state) had got two tube wells and three wells dug within the compound of his two houses. When the whole village was suffering through famine, he and his class refused to let tribals share their 'unlimited' water sources. This instigated the rage of the suffering tribals and led them to join the naxalites group. The group was headed by Arijit, and culminated in the 'revenge-killing' of Surja Sahu and his sons. The aftermath of this killing resulted in the brutal manhunt launched by the state through 'Operation Bakuli.' Dopdi and Dulna were forced to flee and live the life of escapees, working in different guises with different landowners in and around Jharkhani belt. In order to curb the Naxalite movement the state launched 'Operation Jharkhani', initially under Arjan Singh and then under Senanayak, "a specialist in combat and extreme left politics." (Spivak 1997, 393) Dulna could not face this deceitful attack and fails to survive. He was betrayed by his people and was entrapped while drinking water and 'countered'. Since then, Dopdi Majhen was living her life anonymously and was on the 'most wanted' list of the police. It is at this stage that the story begins, the story of objectification of female body that has never been questioned but always been exploited.

The vigour of the story lies in its foregrounding in Hindu mythology. Draupadi is symbolized before us between two versions of her name 'Dopdi' the tribal woman and 'Draupadi', the classical character from Mahabharata. In the Epic Draupadi was married to five Pandava Brothers. In the patriarchal context of the epic world, Draupadi becomes singular and her husbands are pluralized. This story questions Dopdi's singularity for the reason that she was placed first as a comrade activist monogamous marriage and later in a situation of multiple rapes. On the other hand, the classical character of Draupadi is used as a form to represent a character of heroic deeds. Her legitimized pluralisation as a wife between her five husbands, accentuates the male glory as she was the reason behind the crucial battle of Mahabharata. Yudhistir, her eldest husband, puts her honour at stake in the game of dice which resulted in Duryodhana's (the enemy chief) attempt to pull off Draupadi's saree but fortunately

she was saved by Lord Krishna to be publicly stripped off. Gayatri Spivak points out: Within a patriarchal and patronymic context she is exceptional, indeed “attacker” in sense of odd, unpaired uncoupled. Her husbands, since they are husbands rather than lovers, are legitimately Pluralized. (Spivak 1988, 183)

Mahashveta Devi has attempted to deconstruct and reconstruct the epic figure of Draupadi in her tribal character Dopdi. In her derivation of Dopdi from Draupadi, She has an implicit point of view when she has represented Dopdi as a robust and strong female who is impossible to be tamed by patriarchal rules. The story revolves around the search for Dopdi, until she was apprehended by the tactics of Bengali army officer, Senanayak. She was then tortured and gang raped. But after the tragic incident, instead of howling like a helpless victim, she emerged as a heroic figure. In the Epic, Draupadi was saved by Lord Krishna but here Dopdi has allowed men to strip her and after being brutally raped she refused to put on her clothes. Her behaviour was incomprehensible and strange. In refusing to obey the commands, she appears bigger than life to the all too calculating Senanayak. She walked naked towards Senanayak in the bright sunlight, upright and sure. She says:

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 of Senanayak’s white bush-shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says, There isn’t 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... Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (196)

In the Epic, Krishna’s rumination serves “to construct and glorify male dynastic expansionism as divine narrative.” (Morris, 180) Draupadi is viewed much as an object in the hands of patriarchy. Lord Krishna’s miracle in fact proves that women are perceived as ‘Objects’ and in losing her reputation she would have tarnished and defiled the male genealogy. On the other hand, Mahashweta Devi’s story does not revolve around a miracle to happen to save her dignity rather the story successfully depicts the reality, what actually happens to women when they are seen and treated as objects? Here she presents Dopdi’s mutilated body to Senanayak as “the object of your search.” (196) She has stressed on the materiality of what women are for men? They literally are a ‘target’ on which they can exercise their power. Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her and diminish her rather she resists the male power and glory therefore Senanayak is “terribly afraid” of her. She acquires a new identity for herself and refuses to remain the ‘object’ of male domination. She constructs a meaning not only for herself but for the numerous sufferers like her and emerges as “terrified super object- an unarmed target.” Gayatri Spivak says: “Dopdi is what the Draupadi who is written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text of male power could not be.” Dopdi refuses to accept the semiotics of her multiple rape and by doing this she emerges as a woman who deflates the egotism of her perpetrators. Her character strongly declares: “my honour does not lie in between my legs” (109)

Mahashweta Devi has voiced her women protagonists as revolutionary characters. Her work portrays the suffering and subjugation of women as integral part of oppression at the level of caste, class and patriarchy. In this context, it is argued that

as a feminist Mahashweta Devi belongs to the "Feminist and Female Phase" as mentioned by Elaine Showalter, as she sturdily revolts against the social and sexual mistreatment and discrimination faced by women for being women. Not only through her writings but by actively participating as a social activist she never fall short to propagate their invincible inner vigour, determination and potential to live. Beck and Bose aptly says:

Voicing and articulating the muted and the silenced, representing the gender margins within that of caste, the cause of the gendered subaltern, empowerment and radical feminist realism, and an attempt for subaltern speaking have been attributed to her fictional texts (1995, 441).

In her works, through her writing Mahashveta Devi has very well described the plight of tribal people, but the focus was drawn mainly on tribal women who suffer double jeopardy first being a tribal or low class of society and second for being a woman.

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