

Female Nudity as a Plea of Antipathy in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract. Mahasweta Devi's famous short story "Draupadi" (1978) is a Bengali composition that has grown incredibly popular in recent years. The story mainly focuses on the life of a tribal Naxalite woman who fights for both her existence and for her people of marginalized sections. This famous thrilling story is translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The narrative primarily exposed that Mahasweta Devi wanted her readers to feel the same experience through this text. But she speaks out against Indian feudalism and the government's lack of attitude in this tale. Except for Draupadi, there are some other *Breast Stories* (1997) which are also translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak like "Breasts Giver" (2019) and "Behind the Bodice" (2019). Exploitation, occlusion and patriarchal authority are the common themes throughout all these stories. In "Draupadi", Devi delineates the violence, blockade and suppression which was endured by the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen. Dopdi, a Naxalite activist, in the 1970s, confronted authoritarianism, hegemony and the systems of male-dominated society. The murderer of Dopdi's husband- Dulna Mejhen, Senanayak, a rogue system of government machinery, becomes a threat not only to the female class but also to the marginalized sections by seeking the conditions of potential outcomes that knit the historical narrative. His ideas and inherent consistencies are visible in theory but not in practice. This paper aims to identify the strategic ways in which the female body might oppose violence and suppression in a patriarchal society.

Keywords : Authoritarianism; Draupadi; nudity; antipathy.

One of the most eminent Bengali authors and social activists of the twenty and twenty-first centuries, Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was an inspiration. Devi raised her fervent voice against suppression of downtrodden people and her weapons were fiction, short stories and political stories. She is well known for her fruitful writings. Even, she used her writings as a political tool. Because Mahasweta Devi tackles and examines the convergence of important modern-day themes pertaining to gender, race, and class in her writings, she stands out in the realm of socially conscious literature. She expressed the predicament of the subaltern, nota-

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bly that of the tribal people of West Bengal and Bihar and the landless labourers, in the majority of her writings, particularly in her short stories. 1978 saw the Bengali publication of her *Draupadi*, one of the pieces from the “Breast Trilogy” in the *Breast* pieces, in her well-known book *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire). Devi is also known as Dopdi. In her well-known narrative “*Draupadi*,” Devi’s fiery heroine *Draupadi*, who is unable to pronounce her Sanskrit name, is called *Draupadi*. A famous character from the ancient epic *Mahabharata*, Devi’s *Draupadi*, also known as *Dopdi Mejhen*, is desired. In order for the secular geography of the growing Aryan colony to present itself as identical with the epic *Mahabharata* and so justify itself, it is “an accretive epic, where the “scared” geography of an ancient battle is slowly expanded by succeeding generations of poets” (Spivak, 381). *Senanayak*, a rogue system of government machinery, murders *Dulna Mejhen* and humiliates and physically assaults *Dopdi*, wife of *Dulna Mejhen* for threatening tribal marginalized people.

Female Nudity as a weapon of Antipathy

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an eminent feminist deconstructionist and a great scholar of Postcolonial literature, has translated Devi’s famous short story *Draupadi*. “*Draupadi*” represents a “moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the one hand, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles, on the other hand, a law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression” (383). Because of its daring depiction of female rebellion and defiance, it had a profound effect on the readers. The final act of subversion also bears the stamp of the interim victory of native epistemology, as well as the reversal of shame upon the preparators. The numbing rave of *Senanayaka*, the blackguard, ascertains a crisis - however fugacious - where all the power of hierarchies gets invented and the naked body becomes a weapon of sheer antipathy against the authoritarian power. Devi views politics as negative because it accelerates division and repression in society. Devi rightly opines: “Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics”.(247).

The immediate plot of the story is the peasant movement against landlords that infuriatingly drew the fury of the government and led to Operation Bakuli, which targeted the so-called Naxalite peasants

considered culpable in the eyes of the government. The extreme leftists led it as a crusade against the capitalist class. As a female protagonist and rebellious figure, Dopdi Mejhen raises her voice against Bakuli's landlord and roguish bourgeois named Surja Sahu. Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Mejhen both are fugitives and the inhabitant of Cherakhan, Bankrajharh. They are the wanted list of the police: "Name Dopdi Mejhen, age 27, husband Dulna Mejhen (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrajharh, information whether dead or alive and/ or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...."(16). Either Vedavyasa's Draupadi or Devi's Dopdi Mejhen, both wanted to lead the ordinary easy life. Dopdi's only needs are "... some kerosene. She'd rub into her scalp and get rid of the lice. Then she could wash her hair with baking soda"(24). Due to heavy drought the people of Birbhum suffered much. Domestic animals and crops were dying because of the acute water crisis. But Surja Sahu's had enough water. Villagers pleaded for water to Surja Sahu but he refused to share the water. Finally, Dulna, Dopdi Mejhen, and the other rebellious villagers murdered the cruel landlord Surja Sahu. Dopdi claimed, "His mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll pull out his eyes" (Draupadi, 99). He cuts their wages and deprives them of drinking water during drought. Police institute a search for the law-breakers who flee to the forest. Unfortunately, Dulna is caught and killed by the two policemen. But Dopdi and other non-tribal educated revolutionists keep eluding from the police grip. But Senanayaka, the police chief, ultimately apprehends Dopdi. A spellbinding, horrifying and incredibly inspiring series of events is depicted in the story's aftermath, making it unique in the canon of writing about Indian women. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi behaves as no woman protagonist had hitherto dared to. After being caught by the policemen, Senanayaka forced her to blurt all the information to the other activists. When she refuses to reveal any information regarding the Naxalite cadres, Senanayaka, the rogue, gives the command to his men, "Make her. Do the needful" (105) and Dopdi is stripped naked, deprived of food and water, repeatedly raped and brutally assaulted by the army soldiers as her body is tied to four posts. A brutal violence accelerates on a tribal woman by the name of naked power politics:

"Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn." Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon.

Slowly the bloodied nailheads 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 her? (115).

A few days later, the officers bring her back to the tent and instruct her to get dressed for her appointment with the Senanayaka, who is in charge of her case. She hurls the water down as the guard carries a bucket of water ahead for her to wash herself. She then exits her tent and moves approaching Senanayaka while wearing nothing but her head held high. Senanayaka and his officers get afraid for the first time due to her naked appearance:

“Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.”

“Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.”

“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?”

(125)

The female characters of Mahasweta Devi’s works are renowned for being responsive to their difficulties. They do more than simply be. Dopdi does not accept defeat simply either. Devi has first and foremost given Dopdi a voice that eventually turns out to be a magnificent one in the short story’s conclusion. In Spivak’s famous essay can the Subaltern speak, she makes an argument that subaltern women cannot speak up. She argues that the subaltern is even more profoundly hidden if, in the framework of colonial production, she has no past and is mute due to her gender. Further, the portrayal of Devi’s Dopdi disproves Spivak’s thesis

of subalternism. Here, Dopdi's voice changes to become the voice of the marginalized sections, but only in a specific area and to a limited audience. In the third section of the story, her numerous and powerful questions stand out together with her ululations, making her a strong voice, the voice of the subaltern women. In many ways, her nakedness, too, gives her a voice and reveals to be a conscious rejection of what society expects of women, giving her a distinct role in the plot of the story. Devi depicts Dopdi being raped from her point of view as opposed to the male voyeuristic gaze. In the final series of occurrences, Dopdi reaches what Spivak refers to as the "area of lunar flux and sexual difference" ("Draupadi", 184). Dopdi realizes that her experiences remodel her feminine identity in the text, transgressing societal and gender codes. Devi is known for reinventing stories around myths and epics. The story takes place in Champa Bhumi, a small village in West Bengal, and is devoid of the great storyline and regal characteristics of *the Mahabharata*. Devi's narrative reconstructs Draupadi's "Cheerharan episode". In *the Mahabharata*, Kauravas try to strip Draupadi publicly at their court. She screams out in desperation for heavenly intervention, "O Lord of the World....God, in whom I have complete faith, please not abandon me in this dire plight. You are my sole refuge. Protect me." (94) But this kind of supplicatory discourse is condemned by Devi's Dopdi. The modern victim of man's brutality rejects the charity offers of men and refuses to bow to the brutes. They hardly awaken any shame in Dopdi. Even so, she enters the Senanayaka's office naked and with her head held high after having been sexually assaulted numerous times, and she says, "There isn't a man here I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me - come on, counter me-?" (Draupadi, 104) As a result, after being raped, Devi's Dopdi refuses to be clothed, and the ancient heroine begs to be spared the humiliation of being publicly nude.

The main characters in Mahasweta Devi's story portray the female body as the one that rejects, defies and resists male authority. Here, in the story, Dopdi defies authoritative figures and the greater realm of political uprisings by subverting social norms of feminine behaviour using her body's stark nudity. Her bare body becomes an active agent of her political protest. When the Senanayaka asks Dopdi where her clothes are, she replies bravely and angrily:

"Naked walking towards him in the

bright sunlight with her head high.”
 “Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm
 and says in a voice that is as terrifying,
 sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation.
 What is the use of clothes? You can strip
 me but how can you clothe me again?
 Are you a man?” (104).

Here, she not only mocks masculinity and caste discrimination on the idea of power in this passage but also she makes fun of the dominant patriarchal society that upholds and endorses the model of the well-dressed woman.

In Mahasweta Devi’s representation of the female, body becomes imperative because it becomes a site of a clash between the competing discourses of state nationalism, native culture, capitalism, patriarchy and social exploitation. Within the nexus of these social institutions, the body of the female subaltern is rendered the most marginalized, subject to brutality and violence. In the story, the representation of a female’s body becomes representative of the gender politics of the contemporary milieu, and the physical body also becomes a mirror of societal wrongs. In *Behind the Bodice*, the ‘aestheticization’ of the female breasts, as Kanika Gandhi puts it, bears violent repercussions on the female subject- ultimately stripping off her body parts. Twelve Meitei women participated in a nude protest in July 2004 in the state of Manipur in Northeast India, an area with a lengthy history of separatist activities against the Indian state. The women were demonstrating against the murder, rape, and torture of thirty-two-year-old Thangjam Manorama, who was being detained by the Indian army’s Assam Rifles unit on a charge of militancy. Press accounts state that an Assam Rifles officer approached the gathering of women and, with their hands clasped in prayer, begged them to cover themselves while brandishing banners that read, “Danger” in red text on white: “Indian army, rape us!” and “Indian army, take our flesh!” (Misri, 79). Gayatri Spivak finds the same thing in *Senanayaka*, an exploitative machine, that tortures inhuman ways on Dopdi and she employs her naked body against authoritarian politics and bureaucracy. As a result, Dopdi’s “honour is retained and Dharma is sustained” (Khanna, 103).

Twenty-two-year-old Pooja Chauhan, a citizen of Gujarat, India, was followed by television cameras in July 2007 as she strolled through the streets of Rajkot wearing only her jeans. She was holding a crimson

rose and a handful of bangles in one hand, and a baseball bat in the other. Chauhan was furious. She was angry that the police had ignored her claims that her in-laws had been abusing her physically, psychologically torturing her, and even threatening to kill her because she had not been able to get a male kid and dowry. Twenty-two-year-old Pooja Chauhan, a citizen of Gujarat, India, was followed by television cameras in July 2007 as she strolled through the streets of Rajkot wearing only her jeans. She was holding a crimson rose and a handful of bangles in one hand, and a baseball bat in the other. Chauhan was furious. She was angry that the police had ignored her claims that her in-laws had been abusing her physically, psychologically torturing her, and even threatening to kill her because she had not been able to get a male kid and dowry. And recently, an incident that happened in Iran in 2022, centered around a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman named Mahsa Amini who defied wearing a Hijab and her murder by the police force created a great buzz around the whole world. As a result, the girls of Iran went topless and protested under Niloufer Fouladi's leadership. By this protest, the protesters claimed:

"Iran's Anti-Hijab demonstration now escalated to a topless protest.....From removing the hijab to throwing it away to burning it and cleaning shoes by hijab! From opening a face to opening of breasts!! It will now be straight to bottomless to no clothes tomorrow!!"

(Chulov, 253)

Dopdi Mejhen totally owns and subverts all ideas about female subjugation. Senanayaka is confused when she laughs aloud. He believes Dopdi has lost his mind. But the assumption that women are readily driven to hysterics by pressure is deeply embedded in a terrible patriarchal belief system. Although it was thought that Dopdi would feel guilty about being so nude, she confronts the offenders in a righteous and frightening manner, "Draupadi pushes Senanayaka with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayaka is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (Draupadi, 104).

Output of the Discussion

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has rightly opined that "In the final lines of the narrative, Draupadi undergoes a kind of apotheosis. She becomes a larger-than-life symbol of female empowerment, striking terror into the

heart of her beholders” (Spivak, 130). Dopdi strives to reclaim the rights of proletariats from the Capitalist class. Social injustice has another dimension in a patriarchal society. The naked woman spits at the man and mocks at brute power. They can take her life but cannot break her spirit. In conclusion, it can be said that though Dopdi’s violation begins with her gendered body, this very body emerges as her vital source of resistance. An admonition to idealized manliness, however, cannot ultimately serve the objective of undermining state patriarchy. Mahasweta Devi’s strong work upends the tradition of Indian women writers by elevating the idea of Draupadi above that of the average woman and creating a realm of feminist fiction that is blatantly defiant. While Devi’s Dopdi is not redeemed in the Draupadi event of “cheelharan” in the age-old *the Mahabharata* epic, Devi holds down to exercise her agency by resigning to be a victim, leaving the armed men “terribly afraid.” In the end, Dopdi proves to be a strong-willed woman because she refused to accept the shame or disgrace that come with sexual abuse and rape—a fact that is eerily pertinent to modern-day India.

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