



Violence on Women and Its Resistance: A comparative study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Bride* and Mahasveta Devi's *'Draupadi'*

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative commentary on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* and Mahasveta Devi's short story *Draupadi*. The study explores the representation of violence towards women. Many critics have treated the trope of a successful escape from atrocities--as we find in *The Pakistani Bride*--as a woman's expression of subversion and the most logical choice there is: if abused, run. The universalization of such notions has encouraged violence and turned it into an everyday expression of gender dynamics. With domestic violence on the rise during the post-COVID-19 worldwide lockdown scenario -- when *she* cannot run away -- addressing the practice of violence on women has become a crying concern. Understanding the underlying toxicity that masculine hegemony wears like a badge of honor, is merely scratching the surface of the power-politics. Critics such as Indira Bhatt, Novy Kapadia, Makrand K Paranjape and others alienate the escapee--Zaitoon--from countless women around the globe who stand up and resist. Comparative reference to Mahasveta Devi's short story "Draupadi" distinguishes between these two attitudes toward women's subjugation--escape and confrontation. This study promises to bring new insight into the patriarchal structure of our society through the comparative study of the two aforesaid works.

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The Labour Bureau conducted its last Annual Employment –Unemployment (EUS) Survey in 2015-16. According to its reports, 25.8% of the total female population in India is working or seeking payment for their labours. In Section F of Snapshots of Crimes in Indian 2019, the National Crime Records Bureau shows a total number of 4,05,861 cases of crime against women were filed in a single year, i.e. 2019. It is almost 7.3% more than the total number of cases lodged the previous year (2018) which is 3,78,236 cases. It further elucidates that in 2019 the majority of cases registered in that category belonged to the category ‘Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives’ which is almost 30.9 % of the total cases registered. It is an open secret that the registered crimes are just figures that fail to hint at the actual number of crimes committed against women. The number of non-working women as well as men has increased considerably following the COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent lay-offs in various sectors. The women are the ones who are falling prey to domestic violence committed by the men, both employed and unemployed.

South Asian women writers have been instrumental in bringing to the fore the original condition of women behind the door. Mahasveta Devi and Bapsi Sidhwa are South Asian women writers who wrote to expose the darkness beneath the skin of the social relationships between men and women in South Asia. The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa like *The Pakistani Bride* (1992), *The Ice-Candy Man* (1991) and *An American Brat* (1993), set in pre-independence and post-independence India deal with the Parsi populace that migrated to undivided India. Written in a satirical style these novels are replete with emotions of women be it Parsi, Pakistani or India. The women characters range from tribal women to politically powerful women. On the other hand, Mahasveta Devi was instrumental in depicting the plight of women and tribals in India in *Rudali* (1993), *Agnigarbha* (1978), *Hazar Churashir Maa* (1998), to name a few. Devi wrote in Bangla. Her novels and collections of short stories have been translated by literary stalwarts including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This paper looks forward to bringing into discussion Sidhwa’s *The Pakistani Bride* (1992) and Devi’s ‘*Draupadi*’, originally published as a story in her collection *Agnigarbha* (1978). It has been translated by Spivak. The latter writes in the foreword to her translation:

we grieve for our Third-World sisters; we grieve and rejoice that they must lose themselves and become as much like us as possible in order to be "free"; we congratulate ourselves on our specialists' knowledge of them. (381, Spivak)

These satirical remarks of Spivak spearhead a discourse on how femininity is looked upon from the hegemonized point of view, especially in western culture. In ‘*The Dynamics of Gender Hegemony*’, S. Budgeon discusses prominent gender theorists like R. W. Connell, M. Schippers and Judith Butler who have created social models and matrices to map the variation of social practices related to gender relations and hegemony. She concludes:

[...]while the models developed by Connell and Schippers recognize that masculinity acquires its legitimacy via a rejection of femininity, it is evident that new ‘empowered’ femininities are also threatened by aspects of feminization, thereby preserving the historical devaluation of femininity

underpinning gender inequality. Dynamics that constitute this process also delegitimize critical counter discourses associated with alternative femininities and their potential to undermine hegemonic relations by assigning them a pariah status. (Budgeon, 328)

The female protagonists Zaitoon and Draupadi in *The Pakistani Bride* and 'Draupadi' respectively represent aspects of feminization. In the case of Zaitoon, the patriarchal narrative devours her. She is always at the receiving end of the acts committed by her husband Sakhi. Critics such as Indira Bhatt, Novy Kapadia, Makrand K Paranjape and others alienate the escapee--Zaitoon--from countless women around the globe who stand up and resist. Comparative reference to Mahasveta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' distinguishes between these two attitudes toward women's subjugation--escape and confrontation. In 'Draupadi' we find the rebel Santhali woman Dopadi writing her own story with her blood and hatred that challenges the form of femininity that has the cultural consent. Both are stories of rebellion against the patriarchal hegemony. Dopadi has also a political undercurrent seeping through its narratives that refers to the Naxalite¹ movement in West Bengal and surrounding tribal areas.

II

Zohra and Sikander were forced to leave India with their daughter Munni immediately after the partition. They boarded a train from Ludhiana to Lahore. An angry Sikh mob attacked the train slaughtering all the Muslim passengers. Munni was rescued by Qasim, a Kohistani man who renamed her after Zaitoon, his daughter who died of small-pox as a child. Qasim and Zaitoon settled in Lahore. When the girl attained puberty, Qasim married her off to his Kohistani cousin's son. Taunted by his clansmen and eager to assert his "masculinity" Sakhi beat up Zaitoon at the slightest of pretexts. She ran away in an attempt to reunite with her father, her homeland. After days of roaming about in the stony mountains, she located the bridge to cross over into the mainland. But, before she could, she was captured and raped by two tribals and was left to die. Major Mushtaq, a Pakistani army officer, rescued Zaitoon and hid her in his military base near the bridge separating the chaos of Kohistan from Lahore. Later, the weak and half-conscious Zaitoon is put on a military truck for safe passage to Lahore. The narrative has often been read in the light of women's fight to reclaim their 'right-to-live' braving extreme physical conditions: hunger, thirst, lack of shelter, and violence against their bodies.

The story 'Draupadi' is set in the 70s' West Bengal that had witnessed bloodbaths in the name of rebellion and suppressing it. Marcus Franda remarks that the Naxalbari movement a.k.a the Naxalite movement that originated at Naxalbari was nothing like the other peasant movements which were led only by the middle-class living in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Rather "Naxalbari has spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes," says Franda, "including tribal cultivators" adds Spivak in her foreword to the translation of 'Draupadi'. A twenty-seven year old Draupadi or Dopadi Mejhen (no one was educated enough in the villages to pronounce her Sanskrit name correctly) was being hunted by the Officers at Bankrajhar police station. She and her husband Dulna Mejhen had gone underground after leading a mob of lower caste people to slaughter the upper castes and occupying their houses and wells that were reserved only for the upper castes. Dulna was spotted and murdered in the Jhatkhani forest. The duo was hiding thereafter Captain Arjan Singh had suppressed the

peasant-uprising by opening fire at the villagers with apparently no survivors. Senanayak who prided in his accurate ambush tactics left Dulna's body untouched, using it as a bait to draw the prey, Draupadi, the "Most notorious female...Long wanted in many....Dossier" (Devi, trans. Spivak, 392). It failed. When she was finally apprehended by Senanayak who had help from some insiders in her tribe, the soldiers brought her to the police camp in the evening. She was interrogated for two hours, respectably. As the night fell, Senanayak ordered his subordinates: "Make her. Do the needful" (Spivak, 401) Draupadi was stripped and the guards at the camp took turns to violate her. In the morning when Senanayak asked for her, the guards gave her some water and clothes to make herself presentable. She resisted being clothed and was brought to Senanayak naked and bleeding. Senanayak, who prided over his skill in apprehending and eliminating enemies, did not know how to reply in the language in which Draupadi's figure had taunted him.

III

Despite hailing from two different genres both works- *The Pakistani Bride* (novel) and 'Draupadi' (short story)- bring to the fore the struggles women face in terms of physical humiliation and pain to survive in this beautiful world dominated by patriarchal and heteronormative paradigms. The short story portrays an empowered woman character and the novel highlights a teenage girl who's only motivation is survival. At a glance, the latter stands weak in comparison to the empowered woman. However, in both the situations, they take decisions that are likely to dissatisfy the patriarchal monarchs but still they stick to them nonetheless. In this, the reader finds the language of resistance.

In *The Pakistani Bride*, when Zaitoon, the said teenager and then the wife of an uncivilized Kohistani, waves at the soldiers crossing her path, Sakhi, her husband, becomes blind with rage and jealousy.



A stone hit Zaitoon hard on her spine. She whirled, her eyes frantically searching the boulders. Another stone hit her head and bounced on, clattering down the rocks. She looked up in terror. To one side of the overhang, almost vertically above her, stood Sakhi. Impassive and Intent, the sapphire fire of his eyes did not shift. [...] He dragged her along the crag. [...] His fury was so intense she thought he would kill her (Sidhwa, 185)

This does not stop, when Zaitoon clings at his husband's feet in an attempt to beg for mercy, Sakhi's trousers come undone. The humiliation strikes the young Kohistani hard. "He aimed a swift kick between her legs, and she fell back. Sakhi kicked her again and again and pain stabbed through her. She heard herself screaming. At last, he lifted her inert body across his shoulders and carried her home." (Sidhwa, 186) It is to be noted that the humiliation of Sakhi is two-fold. Firstly, in a phallogocentric world, phallus which is often referred to as the female desire signified has to be kept hidden. Once exposed, it loses its exclusivity and degrades the person which it is attached to. Secondly, it was Zaitoon, a female, who unknowingly had tugged at her husband's trousers hard enough for the tassel to hold it in its place. A phallus exposed by a female is akin to a heinous crime committed by a woman upsetting the masculine hegemony. The narrative draws the reader's pity for Zaitoon. The reader is almost convinced that whatever Sakhi did in a feat of rage is justifiable because he is an uneducated tribal fellow who is simply beating up his wife for humiliating him. This thread brings us to the relationship

between Dulna and Draupadi who were equally uneducated tribal folk, yet they had mutual respect as the narrative suggests. When Draupadi was about to be apprehended, her thoughts were very clear: “I swear by my life. By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told.” Throughout the narrative we find the duo fighting together, singing and dancing together, hiding together until Dulna is shot dead by the police. Draupadi’s profile oscillates between a wanted criminal, a brave and shrewd woman and a lover. Instead of drawing pity, the reader finds her raped, bleeding and stark presence unsettling as does Senanayak who prided on his skill to contain a situation. In this regard Monique Wittig’s assertion complements the relationship of language and women’s oppression: “The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say the language you speak is made up of signs that, rightly speaking, designate what men have appropriated” (Wittig, 112-114).

Draupadi, a Santhal rebel leader, was arrested for her involvement in the Naxalite movement. She was raped in captivity. Generally, rape victims are threatened to silence and it works out most of the time. Society facilitates this system by stigmatising the victims. Therefore, her violators failed to anticipate that Draupadi would stand up front.

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, [...]She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at [...]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. (Spivak, 23)

The carefully assorted images arrest our senses. The stench of blood trickling down her lips, the mapped gore of her wounds, and the force of her body with which she pushes Senanayak, become a part of the reader’s experience. Sidhwa, on the other hand, keeps her otherwise vivid narrative away from representing Zaitoon’s body. It is hidden most of the time save for the consummation of the marriage. The reader is restricted to the position of an onlooker who sympathizes with Zaitoon.

At times, apparent forms of subversion can be a deceptive extension of the dominant ideology and no opposition can exist beyond the system. Judith Butler notes:

The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation.[...] it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law. (Butler, 117)

Mahasveta Devi exemplifies such an idea. Draupadi stands stark naked displaying her bruises publicly, unlike Zaitoon's wish to disclose her wounds to her father and her mother-substitute Miriam. Instead of becoming the remnants of humiliation and slavery, Draupadi's wounds become a language offending the high seat of masculine hegemony. She wears the badge of resistance. She inks Senanayak's white shirt with her blood and destroys his

powerful poise. Her body--bloody and scarred beyond recognition--becomes her language of resistance in which a terrified Senanayak cannot retaliate.

IV

Art and literature composed in a patriarchal language (Showalter) has written women into the roles of 'weaker-sex', 'second-sex', 'fairer-sex', 'marker of sex' (Butler). This narrative provides a challenge to such set notions: "Frailty, thy name is woman." (Hamlet) Men forced Dopadi to cover her bruised body at daytime to avoid looking at what they did to her by night. She not only resisted it but also tore off every bit of cloth with her teeth to reveal the history of scars written on her body by night by those very men. Devi's Dopadi survives torture and rape and refuses to put on clothes. During the daytime, she flashes her bruised body in front of the people who had tortured her during the night. Zaitoon is shown to be at the mercy of the major who carefully wraps up her fatigued and bruised body in a blanket. The teenage bride from Lahore longs to disclose her bruises to her family -- who she believes to be more humane than the tribals -- and hoping to win some sympathy and perchance evoke regret for forcefully marrying her off. However, one is left unsure if Lahore with its promise of a cultural grandeur, would harbour her dreams of a nourishing home.

Draupadi and Zaitoon underwent extreme brutality. Zaitoon tried to run away whereas Draupadi weaponised whatever remained of herself. One cannot sympathize with Draupadi. She invokes awe as the closing lines wield power and vivacity. Her ringing laugh shakes patriarchy out of composure. Previous readings romanticizing Zaitoon and her *khudi*²(will-power, referred to in the novel)--she crosses mountains, spends sleepless nights on stony valleys, runs away from abuse--exoticises her act of survival. In today's world, thousands of women in their daily lives clutch their purse to their chest, get pushed around in public conveyance, and take that lonely lane back home to face a husband who has the right to do to her body what the outsiders do illegally. They survive.

Endnotes

1. Naxalite Movement - The peasants of Naxalbari (West Bengal, India) revolted against social inequality and exploitation in 1967. Later, this revolt resulted in a nationwide revolution and engendered the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).
2. "Khudi" - means ego, selfhood, self-will, etc. in Urdu. *The Pakistani Bride* (1992) Sidhwa quotes a poem by an Urdu poet Mohammed Iqbal. "*khudi ko kar buland itna ki har Taqdeer se pehle khuda bande se khud poche Bata Teri Raza kya hai.*" Sidhwa roughly translates it as: "Heighten your khudi to such majesty/ that before every turn of fate/ God himself asks man-/ "Tell me, what do you wish?"

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