



# 'Culture of Resistance' in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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I raise up my voice, not so that I can shout,  
but so that those without a voice can be heard.

(Malala Yousafzai- *Nobel Peace Prize* winner 2014)

Across the world, gender discrimination has been a burning topic for authors, journalists and social reformers of all times. Women, in all ages, have been the victims of male hegemony. They are being treated as daughters of lesser-gods where they are harassed, humiliated and exploited physically, sexually and emotionally. This gender-centric discrimination has emerged as a cause of concern for the organisations working for the cause of women. Within Indian society, the traditional patriarchal norms have pushed women to secondary status. The roles prescribed for women in our society have systematically resulted in their subordination which is so ingrained in their psyche and persona that they unknowingly accept this without thinking of its consequences. As French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir puts it in her famous book *The Second Sex*: "A woman is not born, she becomes a woman".

In India, a woman is not seen as an individual with an identity of her own. Rather she is always seen as a member of the family-as a daughter, sister, wife or mother of a male member. The roots of this gender inequality can be traced back to times of Manu in 200 B.C. where a woman is supposed to be subjected to her father in childhood; in youth, to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. She must not be independent. During the Vedic period, education to women was an accepted norm. The deterioration in the position of women is generally ascribed to the foreign invasions on India leading to more constraints in their life, especially as a consequence to Muslim invasions. During colonial domination gender relations were redefined. The reformers of Indian Renaissance focused their attention on various social evils like *sati*, child marriage, widow remarriage, polygamy, *devdasi* system etc. With the untiring efforts made by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati and others, a great number of women were educated and increasingly involved themselves in

the freedom movement. Gandhiji believed that *swaraj* would be meaningless without the upliftment of women. His ideas were in close similarity with the demands of the women's liberation movement all over the world—equality in the family and the society, the right to one's own body and the opening of wider opportunities for self development and a refusal to be regarded as a sex symbol.

In the post-independence India, a provision was made in *The Constitution* which provides that no distinction will be made on the basis of gender. Through these provisions *The constitutions* promises to provide economic, social and political justice to all the citizens of our country. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. Article 16 provides for the equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 300-A provides that no person shall be deprived of his property right by authority of law. Article 39 provides that the citizens, men and women, equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood. It also provides for equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

Under the guise of protection, patriarchal hegemony oppresses women at several levels. Violence against women is the most rampant violation of human rights. In the 21st century when women have shown their strength in every arena, the crimes against women continue to exist. According to *United Nations Report*, 89 countries collected data on violence against women between 2005 to 2014. It states that women across the world, regardless of income, age or education, are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. Worldwide, 35 percent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner at same point in their lives. Surprisingly, in majority of the countries, less than 40 percent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort. The percentage of women seeking help from the police is less than 10 percent. Experience of violence can lead to long term physical, mental and emotional health problems. It may lead to death of the affected women.

Dalit and tribal women are triply burdened and discriminated on the basis of caste, class and gender. They are the targets of upper caste hegemony and simultaneously victims of their own dalit male counterparts. The scenario for dalit women is far more depressing as they constitute the largest percentage of bonded labour, sex workers or prostitutes, domestic helps in houses etc. Dalit and tribal women are the most oppressed group of society as they are the victims of patriarchal hegemony, feudalism, casteism and economic deprivation. They are worst victims of violence, exploitation and discrimination. Dalit women have not been given justice in 'Dalit Literature' as they face the hegemony of dalit male writers who speak on their behalf. Dalit women writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and many more are voicing the concerns of their sisters with their creative pen. Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is the first Tamil Dalit text on the Christian Dalit community. It analyses Dalit women's oppression caused by triangular combination of caste, class and gender. The rise of Dalit women writers gave impetus to *Dalit Feminism*. And with her autobiographical novel, Bama becomes the foremost exponent of *Dalit Feminism*. Bama's *Karukku* won international acclaim after its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstorm in 2000. Bama strongly refutes all kinds of oppression and celebrates the resilience and courage of Dalit women. The caste has never been

an important point to be discussed among feminists before 1990. Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* and *We also Made History: Women Ambedkarite Movement* by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (Tr. Wandana Sonalkar) are a few attempts in this direction. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit woman's Memoirs* (Tr. by Maya Pandit) traces the journey of three generations of Dalit women who struggle to overcome the burden of their caste and gender.

Tribal women are equally oppressed and marginalised. Though the status of tribal women appear to be better because many tribes are matriarchal or matrilineal, especially the tribes of Kerala and Meghalaya. But recent studies have shown that the real decision making power lies with the men of the tribe. Radha Kumar in his work, *A History of Doing : An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India*, states:

Tribal women are oppressed because as women they are used by those who have the power to oppress their people. Rape, torture and forced prostitution are the means land owners and police employ to humiliate, punish and establish control on an entire community which is economically and materially dependant. (139)

Tribals respect their women and allow them much freedom and social movement. But with the colonialism and capitalism, the outsiders spoiled the social fabric of their pristine culture. The *diku*, or outsider, not only exploited the tribal land but tribal women also.

Mahasweta Devi, a versatile genius, is known all over the world as a short story writer and a novelist. She is better known as a social activist. Her writings do not make a category with propaganda writing alone. But she is whole heartedly concerned for the lives of those who are the poor, the underprivileged, the downtrodden and especially the tribal class. She makes a very sincere attempt to articulate the suppressed feelings of the silent sufferers.

Mahasweta Devi, a champion of tribal rights, has weaved her stories on the matrix of oppression where fibres of caste, class and gender intertwine. She discusses the women issues within the larger framework of class exploitation. The men and women are equally oppressed. But it doesn't mean that she underplays the issue of gender. In an interview with Gabrielle Collu, she says:

Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special problems. They add to my stories naturally, not just to uphold the woman. (224)

Mahasweta Devi strongly dismisses the tag of a feminist writer. But she finds "that woman suffers because of her class and she suffers because of her body" (Gabriel Collu 224). Devi projects women in her works as she finds them as an activist, in society. The writer's choice of not being feminist, does not underplay her concerns with downtrodden women.

Numerous women characters, in her stories come from different historical backgrounds and social milieu. The gender sensitive portrayal of women characters by Mahasweta Devi is linked to the issues of class, caste, tribe, economic condition etc. Women, in her works, come from different social backgrounds. They are dalit and upper caste, educated and uneducated, tribal and non tribal labourers and working class revolutionaries and rebels. They come from a cross section of Indian society. What binds them together to be Devi's daughters is that they all are oppressed and exploited. They are mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, bonded labourers, witches, prostitutes, rape victims etc. but they are survivors and winners. Their resistance and refusal to be victims of oppressive system encompass the whole narrative of Mahasweta Devi. The system oppresses them at physical, sexual or psycho-emotional level, but these daughters of Devi, with their indomitable spirit, heralds a new dawn of optimism for their other sisters. The lesson drawn at the end of the day is courage. This is the courage to cry at the death of oppressors; courage to stand named in front of the oppressor; courage to shout at an insensitive husband.

Economic exploitation, sexual oppression and state violence make the lives of tribal women miserable. Mahasweta Devi brings out the pain and plight of these women in most of her major works. Devi had a long association with tribal women. She understands and comments in *Imaginary Maps* when she says:

Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed. In the nineteenth century, for example, mainstream Indian reformers had to struggle to pass a *Widow Remarriage Act* in caste-Hindu society, the society that is generally called Indian. Among the *Austriac* and *Dravidian* tribes of India, on the other hand, in the states of West Bengal and Bihar alone there are Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds, and more-widow remarriage has always been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system, only bride price. (*Imaginary Maps i*)

Mahasweta has many tribal women who are extremely courageous and independent. She places her women characters in such historical circumstances so that their socio-political positioning brings about the real causes of their oppression and marginalisation. The tribal Women's exploitation is the direct outcome of their community's exploitation as a whole. In the process of class exploitation, tribal women became an easy prey for outsiders known as *diku*. Devi's essays included in the *Dust on the Road* highlight the statistical details of the working condition of tribals, dalit women and other poor women who work as migrant and bonded labourers in the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab (*Dust on the Road* 1-24, 87-96).

Rape is the fourth most common crime against women in India. According to *The National Crime Records Bureau 2013 Annual Report*, 24923 rape cases were reported across India in 2012. Most rapes go unreported because the rape victims fear the humiliation. There is an increase in the number of reported cases of rape in India from 24923 in 2012 to 33,707 in 2013. It is also revealed in the Report that Madhya Pradesh has recorded the maximum rapes in 2013 among all other states. The most horrifying fact is that majority of the offenders are known to the victims. And most of the victims are aged between 18 and 30 years. According to a *New*

Report published in *The Hindu* dated Jan 22, 2016, eight tribal women from Bijapur district of south Chattisgarh have accused the security forces of "repeated gang-rape and physical torture between Jan. 11 to 14. The police didn't register their complaints. Only after four days, after tribal activist and *Aam Aadami Party Leader*, Soni Sori, addressed a press conference with the victims, the police filed the FIR. Complaints of custodial deaths, rapes and torture are frequent phenomena in the states where security forces have been deployed for security reasons.

"Draupadi" is a story included in the *Imaginary Maps* where security forces gangrape the tribal Naxalite leader Dopdi Mejhen, the female protagonist of the story. The narrative is a tribalized rewriting of the famous episode of *Mahabharata* where Dushsana forcibly and publically strips Draupadi, one of the legendary women characters of the famous epic. It focuses on the tribal insurgency in West Bengal. Dopdi Mejhen is a wanted naxalite in the record of the state. Dopdi is apprehended by the security forces after her companions' breach of trust. The story, after a brief introduction of Draupadi, revolves around the circumstances that led to her arrest. But it is the final scene that has gained a lot of importance and attracted world wide criticism.

During war or insurgency or unrest, rape is a common strategic tactics to subjugate, degrade and humiliate the counter forces. The honour of women is the honour of the whole community. Draupadi belongs to *Santhal* tribe. "She felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women's blood in black armours" (31). Devi shows how women's honour becomes an instrument of setting power equation. The irony is that the patriarchal hegemonist societies, which have a legacy of innumerable legends and myths of protecting women honour, violate the code themselves as and when they get an opportunity to do so. The partition novels are full of heinous crimes against women, perpetuated by the so called 'guardians of honour' of the community. Humiliating women to suppress a community is the most recurrent tool adopted in all ages. It is being used as a tactic to push marginalised in the corners of silence. The honour attached to women and their body becomes the major male chauvinistic method of oppression. Rape became one of the common male dominated act that ensures submission and obedience without any trace of opposition.

Various writers have depicted rape as a male hegemonic tool to oppress women in their novels. What makes "Draupadi" a different case? Sadat Hassan Manto in one of his stories "Open It" depicts the rape of female protagonist Sakina. But at the end, the treatment of theme by Devi and Manto is different. In Manto's story Sakina is weak but in Devi's "Draupadi" the protagonist refuses to be a victim. She subverts the hegemonic male power structure.

The resilience of Draupadi reminds the readers of the epic *Mahabharata* where Draupadi, wife of *Pandava*, was publicly humiliated when the eldest brother Yudhishitra lost her in a game of chess to the *Kauravas*. Dushasana resorts to violence and drags her to the courtroom where he attempts to disrob her by pulling her *Sari* but fails to do so because of divine intervention of Lord Krishna. Draupadi vows that she will not do her hair till the time she washes it with the blood of Dushasana. Devi reconstructs the myth of *Mahabharata* in her story. She revives the existing myths and uses them to suit to new circumstances. The Archetypal Approach to literature

assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters and motifs that evoke basically the same response in all people. According to psychologist Carl Jung, "Mankind possesses a collective unconsciousness" that contains these archetypes and is common to all humanity. Archetypal critics believe that these myths are the source of literary power. The archetypal Draupadi prays to God for help whereas tribal Draupadi challenges the male world to cover her up by clothes. Devi has used the archetype from *Mahabharata* so as to show Draupadi as an archetype of suffering women but the after-effects of humiliation in the epic and rape in the story are quite different. Devi's Draupadi manages to disassociate herself from the 'burden of gender' and rejects the patriarchal shame and humiliation that come with rape. Dopdi, in her cry, spells the doom for patriarchy. Her body becomes 'a weapon of protest', the same body which her oppressors used to suppress her. She manages to topple the patriarchal world order and creates her own space, the symbolic 'a room of one's own'. Dopdi redefines the meaning of gender. She becomes an 'organic intellectual' as Gayatri Spivak comments:

When the subaltern speaks in order to be heard and got into the structure of responsible resistance, he or she is on the way of becoming an organic intellectual. (qtd in Guha xxi)

But the journey to this has not been an easy one. Dopdi lost her husband and suffered the trauma of rape. She leads a life of fugitives and fights for the common good. The struggle between the forces of oppression and the oppressed still continues. Dopdi and her husband Dulna lead the guerilla warfare. At first, Dopdi's husband Dulna is shot dead by the security forces. After Dulna's death, Dopdi commands the group of the oppressed. The Government declares a reward of two hundred rupees for her arrest. But Dopdi is not at all frightened rather she tells her relatives, "Go home, I don't know what will happen, if they catch me, don't know me" (28). And she further reflects. "What will they do if they catch me? They will 'Kounter' me. Let them.... if mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue"(28).

The Government calls Senanayak, an expert in tribals 'guerilla warfare' mechanism. He lays a trap for Dopdi at every bend of the falls where Dopdi and her followers are expected. At last, Dopdi is captured. But a sincere leader as she is, she ululates three times before her arrest to give a signal to other comrades to flee. Dopdi is interrogated and Senanayak disappears giving orders, "Make her, do the needful" (34). And what follows is a democratic procedure of "making" a female captive. In *Mahabharata*, the Lord Krishna comes as rescuer but tribal Dopdi doesn't cry helplessly for the divine help. Mahasweta Devi cannot afford to show a brave *Santhal* woman warrior crying meeklessly for divine help. In a way, Devi rejects the patriarchal sense of security ingrained in women since birth. Dopdi rejects the patriarchal myth of shame associated with her body. She questions the manhood of standing there and declares them as devoid of man like qualities. The rape is not an act of bravery, it is a heinous act of shame. The shame is not for the victim but for the rapist. In the "Introduction" to her novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi observes:

By just making them non-existent, they do not exist for her (Dopdi), all this male stuff, they are trying to do this, by mass raping, by gang raping also you just cannot destroy a woman's spirit, she does not recognize their existence, they are non-existent for her. (xix)

Dopdi, with her mutilated body, naked as she is, refuses to be clothed by them. She faces Senanayak, pushes him with her mangled breasts and Senanayak is terribly afraid to stand before an 'unarmed target'. Recognising the defiance of tribal woman, the feminist writer Patricia Duncker asserts:

Dopdi has refused to endorse men's system of value. She has refused the meaning he has placed on her body. She has refused to bend, to give way, give herself up. He can kill her, but her power, her spirit can never be broken. (qtd. in Dasgupta 49)

Mahasweta Devi too detests the idea of being labelled as feminist writer. But the gender problems do surface while depicting class and caste oppression. While decoding the causes of suffering of all marginalised, women certainly come out as the 'most oppressed group'. T. Jyoti Rani and K. Katayani remark in the article "Violence on Women in the Context of Indian Political Economy - A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima* and "Draupadi":

Mahasweta Devi has written about the oppressed in the feudal system and the oppressed in the capitalistic system which retains still the essence of the feudal exploitative modes. She has portrayed the travails of women in these systems. While her *Ganesh Mahima* depicts the plight of women in the feudal society, her "Draupadi" lays bare the miseries of urban women in a capitalistic society. Whatever be the system, it is a woman who is sacrificed on the altar of male interests. (124)

Though the women are victims of male dominated Super Structure, they are not shown as a 'lost case'. The evolution from victims to survivors; from silence to speech; from reservations to resistance; from repression to rebellion is surely there. They all rise against suppression. Her women, cutting across the boundaries of time and space, become universal figures and they inspire all women around the globe.

While treading the difficult track of womanhood 'carrying the burden of gender on their backs' Mahasweta Devi's women find their own strategies of survival in an oppressive and suffocating social system. The structures of patriarchy in society, caste system, class divisions, invasion into tribal life, development policies of government and the state, all bring cumulative catastrophe for women. Doulotis and Gangors are forced to flee their native places to become bonded labourers in the hellish conditions of our cities. Dopdis and Nandinis are victims of state's insensitive policies. Sujatas and Somu's mothers all suffer even today. They try to raise their voice to disrupt the hegemonic structures of patriarchy, traditional economy and politics. Some of them become 'Nirbhaya' and some become 'Malala' and their march to victory still continues.

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