



Dopdi Mejhen: Redefining Feminist Agency In Draupadi

Dr. P. Shahanaz, HoD, English Department, SJDC, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

This article explores the significant contributions of Mahasweta Devi to contemporary Bengali literature, particularly highlighting her commitment to social justice and advocacy for marginalized communities. Through an analysis of her work, this article sheds light on her multifaceted role as a political activist, anthropologist, investigative journalist, and editor, with a focus on the socio-political landscape of West Bengal and southeastern Bihar. Her notable work "Draupadi," translated by Gayatri Spivak, serves as a central case study, illustrating themes of resistance, injustice, and gender-based violence. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" centers on the themes of resilience and defiance against systemic oppression and gender-based violence. The story portrays Dopdi Mejhen's journey from a victim of brutality to a powerful symbol of resistance and empowerment, challenging patriarchal and socio-political structures.

Key Words: Social Injustice, Marginalized Communities, Violence, Resistance

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi stands as one of the most widely translated Indian authors writing in an indigenous language, gaining recognition as a preeminent figure in contemporary Bengali literature. Born in 1926 into an urban, middle-class family steeped in literary tradition, her prolific literary career spans over a hundred works, including novels, plays, and short story collections. Her writing is deeply rooted in her commitment to social justice, with a particular emphasis on the struggles and resilience of India's tribal populations. Esteemed scholar Gayatri Spivak characterizes Mahasweta Devi as a luminary in Bengali literature, comparable to figures such as Foucault and Derrida in French philosophy and political thought (Spivak, 1988, p. 46).

Literary Contributions

Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre serves as an advocacy platform for marginalized communities, intertwining her roles as a political activist and a literary figure. Her work delves into the socio-political challenges faced by tribal communities in West Bengal and southeastern Bihar. Her storytelling prowess has garnered numerous prestigious awards, including the Jnanpith Award and the Magsaysay Award, recognizing her contributions to literature as a vehicle for social change. In her later works, Devi focuses on the lives and tribulations of underprivileged tribal women, spotlighting the atrocities perpetrated against them. She posits that women constitute "one half of the sky" (Kristeva, p. 202) and maintains that a transformation of the entrenched power structures can catalyse a "social revolution," fundamentally reshaping societal dynamics (Morris, 1995, p. 5).

Case Study: "Draupadi"

"Draupadi," one of Devi's most notable works, revolves around a Santhal tribal woman named Dopdi Mejhen. The narrative commences by juxtaposing various official discourses that both articulate and silence Dopdi's character, elucidating the complex relationship between power, representation, and identity (Devi, 1993). Dopdi's resilience is tested when she is captured by Sena Nayak, a government officer. Subjected to brutal violence by state officers, she becomes a symbol of the pervasive oppression faced by marginalized groups. However, the story's climax is a moment of fierce defiance—refusing to be subdued, Dopdi confronts her captors with unmatched courage, reclaiming her power (Spivak, 1988, p. 196).

Contemporary Interpretation and Feminist Discourse

"Draupadi" uniquely reinterprets the legendary character Draupadi from the Mahabharata, weaving a contemporary narrative that resonates with modern societal issues. The Puranas reference Krityas (powerful women) across various epochs, positioning Draupadi as the Kritya of the Dwaparyuga (Bhaktivedanta, 2006). Devi's Dopdi serves as a compelling synthesis of a palimpsest and a contradiction. Unlike the archetypal Kritya, Dopdi emerges as a formidable figure, challenging societal norms and expectations. This is evident from the following extract of one of the verses of Purana: > "In the Kritar Yuga Renuka was Kritya, > In the Satya Yuga Sita was Kritya, > In the Dwaparyuga Draupadi was Kritya > And in Kalyugas there are Krityas in every house" (Bhaktivedanta, 2006).

Contemporary feminist discourse frequently engages with these mythological figures, reframing them in the context of modern agency and resistance. Through the character of Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi provocatively raises inquiries regarding social responsibility and political activism, encouraging readers to reflect on the historical implications of the Naxalbari movement and comprehend the revolutionary spirit embodied by Dopdi.

Complexities of Dopdi's Character

It is essential to recognize that the complexities of Dopdi's character transcend simplistic interpretations. She embodies a new archetype of resistance, one that challenges the traditional narratives surrounding both mythological and contemporary female figures (Devi, 2008). Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Dopdi serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the often-static depictions of women in literature, instead presenting them as dynamic agents capable of effecting change in their lives and communities (Hameed, 2005, p. 102).

Moreover, Devi's narratives compel readers to grapple with the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, underscoring the multifaceted nature of oppression and resistance. "Draupadi" prompts a re-evaluation of the historical and cultural significance of tribal identities, urging a deeper understanding of the socio-political context in which these communities navigate their existence. By placing tribal women at the forefront of her exploration, Devi not only amplifies their voices but also dismantles the patriarchal narratives that have historically marginalized their experiences (Chauhan, 1990).

In summary, Mahasweta Devi stands as a colossal figure in contemporary Bengali literature, skilfully intertwining her roles as a writer and activist to illuminate the struggles faced by tribal communities, particularly women. Through her visionary storytelling, she captures the essence of resistance and resilience, challenging readers to reconsider their perceptions of power, gender, and social justice. Her work serves not merely as literature but as a call to action, inspiring generations to confront the oppressive structures that pervade society and advocating for a world where the voices of the marginalized are not only heard but celebrated. As we reflect on the complexities of her narratives, it becomes evident that Mahasweta Devi's legacy transcends the boundaries of literature, positioning her as a pivotal force in the ongoing struggle for social equity and human rights.

Analysis of "Draupadi"

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" powerfully protests against the extreme torture and atrocities inflicted on tribal people. The narrative is both shocking and innovative, as it portrays an ordinary tribal woman, Dopdi, who stirs fear among military authorities. Mahasweta Devi represents Dopdi not as a victim, but as an equal to men, fighting for her rights and dignity. Her story is intensely powerful, questioning the lofty patriarchal traditions of Indian culture (Devi, 2008, p. 196).

Throughout the story, the authorities are confused about her real name, Dopdi or Draupadi, with the former being a peasant tribal name and the latter derived from the famous character in the Mahabharata. In the epic, Draupadi is married to the five Pandavas. Spivak notes that within a patriarchal and patronymic context, she is exceptional, described as "attacker" in the sense of being odd and unpaired (Spivak, 1988, p. 46). Mahasweta Devi's story challenges this singularity, as Draupadi in the epic is treated as an object used to demonstrate male power. Her eldest husband stakes her in a game of dice, and although she does not protest, she is dishonoured by Dhritarashtra's son, only to be saved by the divine Krishna.

Patriarchy constantly seeks to conceal its crimes. However, the 27-year-old tribal woman obstructs their path to escape and prevents them from hiding their sin. What is pleasurable under the cover of darkness becomes unbearable in the harsh light of day. In this way, the process of marginalization is challenged, and the dynamic of response becomes reciprocal (Aschroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2001, p. 102). As Spivak rightly remarks:

"The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi- in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops" (Spivak, 1988, p. 196).

In contrast, Mahasweta's Dopdi is captured by the Indian forces through the tactics of Bengali army officer Senanayak. During a cross-examination, she remains silent, leading Senanayak to command the soldiers to "Make her. Do the needful." Dopdi is tortured and raped by multiple men throughout the night. In the morning, she refuses to put on her clothes and instead tears her clothes with her teeth and washes herself. Her behavior, incomprehensible to Senanayak, makes her appear larger than life. She walks naked toward Senanayak, uplifted and sure, spitting blood at him and declaring:

".....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" (Spivak, 1988, p. 196).

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan states that sexual molestation is patriarchy's method of social control. Draupadi in the Mahabharata is punished for laughing at Duryodhana and discourse:

"Sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy's method of social control rather than pathology of sexual violence as such." (Hameed, 2005, p.102)

Draupadi in The Mahabharata has committed the crime of laughing at Duryodhana's confusion in the Pandava's palace of Maya. Moreover, she commits the 'grave mistake' of discoursing on 'legal technicalities' like a lady pandit and questioning the stalwarts of wisdom. Dopdi Meihen, on the other hand, is the 'Comrade Dopdi' and as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "a part of the undoing of the opposites – the intellectual rural, internationalist tribalist – that is the unwavering constitution of 'the underground', and 'the wrong side' of the law" (Spivak, 1988, p.108). She is the aberration to Senanayak, who remains fixed within his class, gender and ventures beyond them. Both Draupadi and Dopdi, therefore, are punished by the attempted stripping of one and the multiple rape of another.

Instead of being saved by a miraculous incident, Mahasweta allows multiple rape of Dopdi. She remains naked at her own insistence. Her nakedness becomes an affront to the masculinity of the attackers. "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again?There isn't any man here that I should be ashamed of," she asserts. Rape in a patriarchal society, is synonymous with the power of manhood. On the other hand, the 'rapability' of the woman's body is because it is believed that a woman's honour lies in her inviolate body. Here, Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, torture her, intimidate her, or let the rape diminish her.

Sunder Rajan further says:

"It is simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system of pertaining to nakedness and rape and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create the disconcerting counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy." Male sexual violence is defeated simply by its demystification and Dopdi emerges as "terrifying super object – an unarmed target." In Mahasweta's story, Draupadi acquires a new self-definition and becomes the active maker of her own meaning. She refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as 'subject' and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence, she constructs a meaning which "Senanayak simply cannot understand" (Spivak, 1988, p.196). She becomes that which resists 'counter' male knowledge, power and glory; therefore he is "terribly afraid."

Gayatri Spivak posits that Dopdi embodies what Draupadi, as depicted in the patriarchal and authoritative sacred texts of male dominance, could never become. Unlike Renuka and Sita, Draupadi only assumed the form of the mythological Kaali to vow vengeance, which was to be exacted by her husbands in the Mahabharata war. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi undermines the arrogance and masculinity of her assailants by rejecting the symbolic meaning of her repeated rape. For Dopdi, rape has transformed her sexuality into a physical wound. She is not 'kritya' as she has not perpetuated the cycle of violence through retribution, either personally or through a male intermediary. Her actions emphatically declare, "My honor does not reside between my legs" (Spivak, 1988, p.109).

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