

## DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "DRAUPADI"

**Dr. Kamaljit Sinha**

Asstt. Professor (Adhoc), Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Mahasweta has written hundred books to her credit, including novels, plays and collection of stories. She has won the prestigious Jnanpith and Magasasay Awards for literature is concerned with the plight of the tribals living on the fringe. Mahasweta becomes more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the unprivileged tribal women and the atrocities inflicted on them. Draupadi is about the Santhal tribe girl, who is vulnerable to injustice but resist the burnt of social oppression and violence with indomitable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age old structures of racial and gender discrimination. Draupadi is translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The most interesting part of the story is that Dopdi Mejhen is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. This paper presents the modern breaks with tradition and the development of new forms of discourse and harmonious with the women's cause for the problems that in rejecting the binary structures of patriarchal discourses which are sight of the political, social and ideological forces of racism in our society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchal Discouse, Authoritative, Molestation, Egotism

---

### INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi is probably the most widely translated Indian writer while working in an indigenous language today. Now recognized as the foremost living writer in Bengali, she has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing. She has spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of West Bengal and the southeast of Bihar as a political anthropologist, investigative journalist and editor of a "People's Magazine". Born in 1926 to urban, middle-class, professional writer, Mahasweta has written hundred books to her credit, including novels, plays and collection of stories. She has won the prestigious Jnanpith and Magasasay Awards for literature is concerned with the plight of the tribals living on the fringe. In her later works, Mahasweta becomes more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the unprivileged tribal women and the atrocities inflicted on them. She believes that women are "one half of the sky" (Kristeva, p.202), transfiguring the prevailing power structures would mean, "a social revolution and the present world would necessarily be transfigured." (Morris, p.5). According to Gayatri Spivak, "Mahasweta Devi is as unusual within the Bengali literary tradition as Foucault or Derrida is unusual in the philosophical or political mainstream in France." (*Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p.46). Draupadi, the Santhal tribe girl who is vulnerable to injustice but resist the burnt of social oppression and violence with indomitable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age old structures of racial and gender discrimination.

Draupadi is translated by Gayatri Spivak. It opens with what appears to be an ironic counterpointing of different modes of official discourse through which the central character, a tribal woman called Dopdi Mejhen, is named, constructed, displaced and silenced.

Mahasweta's Draupadi is a unique reaction of the Draupadi of the Mahabharata. One of the Puranas has the following verse:

“In the Kritar Yuga Renuka was Kritiya,  
In the Satya Yuga Sita was Kritiya,  
In the Dwaparyuga Draupadi was Kritiya  
And in Kalyugas there are Kritiyas in every house.”

Devi's Draupadi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. The character Dopdi is a recreation of Draupadi of the epic, and yet how unlike a 'kritiya' she is! Contemporary feminists re-interpret these myths especially Draupadi's, in women taking over the cause of avenging themselves, for e.g. in N.Chandra's *Pratighat* or Sekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen*. In the protagonist of both these films, one can see resonances of Kaali. Here through Dopdi Mahasweta Devi has tried to raise certain question of responsibility, as she herself demands certain political responses from us. She expects us to know something about the Naxalbari movement and she also wants us to understand something about the revolution that Dopdi is fighting for us. The most interesting part of the story is that Dopdi is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Being a tribal means that she is not considered as a part of mainstream Indian society. She thus occupies lowest rung in a class based society. We find here in the story that the status and respect women are accorded in tribal society is far superior to that of women in mainstream Hindu society. They are treated as equals and protected from the kind of denigration women face elsewhere, as Dopdi here in the story in the first two parts of the story, she is fighting shoulder to shoulder with her husband. It is in the third part of the story that she is provoked to fight male oppression singly, and in the conclusion the use of the white clothe which is associated with purity and innocence, visually contrasted with Dopdi's black body, and is very powerful. So, here Mahasweta Devi represents Dopdi not as victim but she is equal to men who fight for her rights.

Even Mahasweta's Draupadi raises her voice against extremes torture and atrocities inflicted on the tribals. Her way of protest is very different and makes it an extremely shocking, powerful and innovative narrative. She seems to be an ordinary tribal woman but in reality she has created stir among military authorities who are on massive hunt for her. They remain confused about her real name, Dopdi or Draupadi. Dopdi is a peasant tribal name and Draupadi is derived from the name of the famous character in Mahabharata. In the epic, Draupadi is married to five Pandavas. 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."(p.183) Mahasweta's story interrogates this singularity. In the epic, Draupadi is treated as an object and is used to demonstrate male power and glory. Her eldest husband puts her stake in a game of dice. She does not protest. The eldest of their enemies' son Dhritrastra tries to dishonour her by pulling off her sari but she is saved by the divine Krishna.

The Indian forces succeed in capturing the long wanted Dopdi with the tactics of the Bengali army officer, Senanayak. She is cross interrogated for an hour but she remains firm and does not utter a word. Then Senanayak commands the soldiers, "Make her. Do the needful."(195)

Finally apprehended by the army, Draupadi is tortured and raped throughout that endless night and mutilated by infinite lustful men. After the tragic incident, Draupadi does not howl or behave like a helpless victim. In the morning, she refuses to put on her clothes, tears her piece of her clothes with her teeth, and wash herself. Her behaviour is incomprehensible, rather strange. In refusing to obey the command, she appears bigger than life to the all too calculating Senanayak, the army commander. She walks naked towards Senanayak in the bright sunlight, very uplifted 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.” (p. 196)

The story is intensely powerful and shocking. Senanayak feels absolutely powerless and totally shaken. One wonders whether the story interrogates the lofty patriarchal traditions of Indian culture and what kind of identity is created for Draupadi? In the epic Krishna’s meditation serves “to construct and glorify male dynastic expansionism as divine narrative.” (Morris, p.180). Draupadi is as much an object of that patriarchal narrative as she is viewed as an object by the men within the narrative. Lord Krishna’s miracle, in fact, proves the sexual terms in which women are perceived as objects and in losing her honour, Draupadi would have dishonoured the male genealogy. In Mahasweta’s story, a miracle does not happen and divine Krishna does not appear to save her honour. The story very successfully portrays what actually happens to women when they are seen as the objects. She presents her mutilated body to Senanayak as “the object of your search” (p.196). She stresses on the materiality of what women are for men; literally a ‘target’ on which they can exercise their power.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in *The Story of Draupadi’s Disrobing* says:

“Sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy’s method of social control rather than pathology of sexual violence as such.” (p.102) Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* has committed 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 Mejhen, 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.” (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

inviolable body. Here, Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, torture her, intimidate her, or let the rape diminish her. Sunder Rajan 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” (P.196). She becomes that which resists ‘counter’ male knowledge, power and glory; therefore he is “terribly afraid”.

According to Gayatri Spivak, “Dopdi is what the Draupadi who is written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text of male power could not be.” Unlike Renuka and Sita before her, Draupadi took the form of the mythological Kaali only in vowing to avenge herself. She was to be avenged by her husbands in the war of the Mahabharata. Unlike her, and also unlike the modern re-interpreted version of her story, Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi deflates the egotism and manhood of her perpetrators by simply refusing to accept the semiotics of her multiple rape. For her, rape has turned her sex into a physical wound. She is not ‘kriya’ as she has not followed the cycle of violence through retribution, whether through herself or through a male agency. Her action strongly asserts, “My honour does not lie in between my legs.” (p.109).

## CONCLUSION

So, we can say that Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi has been relegated to the position of ‘Other’ marginalized and in, a metaphorical sense and was forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination, but she constructs a language of her own by rejecting the binary structures of patriarchal discourses of the political, social and ideological forces of the society.

## REFERENCES

- Aschroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth, Tiffin Helen. *The Empire Writes Back*, New York, London: Routledge, 2001.
- Aschroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth, Tiffin Helen. *The Post – Colonial Studies Reader*” 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York, London: Routledge, 2006.
- Bhaktivedanta A.C. “*Bhagavad – Gita, As It Is*” 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Mumbai, India: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2006.
- Chauhan, Abha. “*Tribal Women and Social Change in India*, New Delhi: Aditya Publishers, 1990.
- Devi, Mahasweta. “Dopdi” in *Best Stories of Mahasweta Devi*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1993.
- Morris, Pam. *Feminism and Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995.
- Spivak.C.Gayatri. “Draupadi” In *Other Worlds:Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York, London: Routledge, 1988.