



Counter Marginality: A New Diction Of Resistance: A Case Study Of Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi'

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ABSTRACT

From the mythical age to the post-modern era, from rural culture to urban elitism, rape has been used as a deadly weapon by the society to dominate women. From Lucretia to Delhi girl Nirbhaya, rape culture flows like an undercurrent in our society. And India is one of such countries where incidents like rape, gang-rape, sexual harassment, importation of girl-child, molestation by husband and other relatives frequently take place. After so many years of independence, women of our society are suffering from the fatal effect of illiteracy, unemployment, undernourishment, destitution and many more. On such a heap of suffering, rape becomes another massive blow from the patriarchal structure. As we live in a patriarchal society, males are always at the centre of the power-structure and women are at the margin. And we know that in any power-structure various kinds of apparatuses are used to maintain the monopoly. These may be ideological or repressive or both. Society invents and develops ideologies and institutionalises them accordingly. One such ideology is the myth of 'pure' and 'impure' body. This, however, only relates to the female body, thus reinforcing male hegemony. Male-bodies are always considered to be as pure as gold, capable of a magical self-defence and the mythical self-purification. In the *Ramayana* Sita is kidnapped by Ravana; and after her return, her beloved husband Rama asks her to prove her purity. It happens not only in myths, but also in modern society. In our socio-cultural scenario female virginity is celebrated thoroughly. That is why in Hindu culture 'Kumari Puja' or worship of virgins has become a part of our tradition, and that is why women at the time of their menstruation

are not allowed to enter into temples. Even women consider themselves as unholy for those days. In such a condition it is not easy to accept a rape victim as a mere sufferer. There are lot more things related to it. The family of the victim becomes afraid of losing its prestige. So, silence becomes the only choice for her. Not only the tortured woman, but women in general feel a kind of empathy for her. All women and even the normal sensible men, too, become panic-stricken. Rape has such a wide range of effects. That is why sometimes social hegemony uses the heinous act to control, dominate, subjugate and marginalize the 'second sex', or in turn, the forces of anti-state rebellion.

That is what exactly happens to Dopdi Mejhen, the female protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi'. Written in Bangla, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's English translation speaks for itself, and the present paper is based on the English version. The actual name of the protagonist is Draupadi. But because of the tribal pronunciation she becomes Dopdi. The caricature of the mythical name is not simply its tribalised phonological variation, but rather, it has a deeper significance. The story is based on the Naxalite Movement. In 1967 a peasant revolt took place at the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal. Gradually it took the form of a movement. The target of the movement was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm workers, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion. In 1970 East and West Pakistan armed struggle started. In 1971 the armed forces of Government of India were deployed, seemingly because there were alliances between the Naxalites of West Bengal and the freedom fighters of Bangladesh.

Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman, is one of the active participants of that movement. When the story begins, both she and her husband, both are in underground. Senanayak, the Indian-army officer is deployed to search them out. As the story proceeds her husband is killed and she is captured. She is brought to the police-camp. Senanayak orders the police men to 'Make her'. And a number of police men, all through the night, rape her brutally. Devi describes the night in this way: "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 nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts." For the unbearable pain and trauma she loses her sense and after sometimes, when she gets her sense back she can see nothing except her clothes on the ground. She hopes that perhaps they abandoned her for the fox to devour. "But" Devi describes,

“she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn’t have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. Goes on.”

The story, up to that point, depicts the picture of the marginalization of a rape victim. But after that what happens is unexpected, unorthodox and unprecedented. In the next morning when a guard comes to bring her to the army officer she tears her clothes herself with her teeth and walks towards the officer in the bright sunlight naked and bleeding, but with her head high. She comes closer to Senanayak and stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says to him, “The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me?” And she continues bullying everybody around her, saying, “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me...” And then Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her breasts, and for the first time in his career Senanayak is terribly afraid to stand before an unarmed target.

Mahasweta Devi creates an orthodox scenario of marginalization, where rape victims are marginalized by the criminal as well as by the society. And after creating such a devastating perspective she makes her protagonist counter marginality, where the victim takes the centre by marginalizing her perpetrators. Here Devi has found a new language of resistance and a new diction of protest. In this context the name Draupadi is highly symbolic. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi the wife of the Pandavas is assaulted by the Kauravas. She is supplied with infinite length of clothing by Lord Krishna miraculously when Duryadhana and Dushmasana try to unrobe her. But here, in Devi’s story, Draupadi tears off her clothes herself and establishes the point that she is in no way like the mythical Draupadi. As she does not have a Lord Krishna as a saviour, she has found her own way of resistance. And the way is nothing but counter marginalization.

When electronic media makes an interview with a raped woman her face is made blurred, and her identity is concealed. On the other hand, the rapist sometimes hides his face, and sometimes does not. Why? Because our society makes both of them feel ashamed. One, for what he has done, and the other for what has been done to her. The patriarchy attaches some tag lines with the victim. Such as – i) She should not wear such and such kinds of dresses. ii) There must be some fault from the part of the woman. iii) Was there any relation between them? If yes, then it is her fault for sure because she had chosen a wrong guy as her friend. iv) She should not go out so late at night, etc. Thus the response register is always one-way. Everything is judged as if the woman does something wrong and Karma punishes her. The woman’s response is thoroughly neglected. At

best what she can do is to defend herself by denying any fault on her part. Nothing more than that. But in Devi's story the response register is interchanged. Here the process of marginalization of the rape victim is countered by the so called 'shamelessness'. Here defence is transformed into offence. Draupadi's language of resistance is terrifying and sky-splitting when she says: "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" So, they can rape her, but cannot stop her from remaining naked after the rape. Draupadi's naked body stands not only for her literal wound, but also for the wound the society usually gives to women. And patriarchy always wants their crime to be hidden. But the twenty-seven years old tribal woman creates obstruction on their way to escape and does not let them hide their sin. The sin which is enjoyable in dark-night, becomes unbearable in broad day light. Thus the process of marginalization is countered and the response register becomes two-way. As Spivak says rightly:

"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."

If we go back to the *Mahabharata* we will see that Draupadi has five husbands. In fact she is the only example of polyandry, which is very uncommon in India. Despite of her five husbands, she remains 'singular'. As she is equally 'distributed' among the five, she is always in want of her unified entity. Actually she gets five husbands but no lover. Devi's story counters the 'singularity' by presenting, at first, Dopdi as a woman of single husband and then in a condition of multiple rape. In the epic, the polyandry legitimises the male power. That's why she becomes a thing for gamble, and she is about to be stripped publicly. Her perpetrators take it in this way that as she is a wife of five, she is actually the wife of none or of all. That means she is considered as a prostitute. It happens in our present age too. Widow, corporate women, divorcee, poor, orphan, single mothers all are generally considered as public property. Society thinks that if the exact bait is offered she may become a prostitute, or even if she doesn't by herself, the patriarchal society has a right to turn her into one. Even rebels get raped because the general notion behind it is if they are against the authority, they don't have any fundamental right. So, they can be tortured in any way. That is exactly what happens to Dopdi Mejhén. Firstly, she is a rebel, and secondly, she is a widow. So, she becomes an object of entertainment and even when she is not in her sense she is thoroughly raped through the whole night. Here the epic stripping

scene of the *Mahabharata* has been re-created through an inverted matrix by Mahasweta Devi. Here no miracle happens. The men get no obstacle in stripping Dopdi. So, the unfinished scene of ungratified voyeurism and carnal desire in the *Mahabharata* is brought to a brutal finality. Draupadi has been raped. Now what will be the consequences? Devi gives the answer firmly. When the husbands, the so called protectors fail to protect, or when the representatives of law do harm, the only way left is counter attack. So, does Dopdi Mejhhen. She repeatedly says: 'Come on, counter me". In spite of using the word 'encounter" she asks them to counter her. Though ignorantly, but significantly enough she uses the exact word. The tribal Draupadi is ready to take the central position. This is not like her usual fight with domestic weapons. This is her guerrilla war against marginalization. Now she makes everybody nervous; the superiority complex of Senanayak is shaken, and suddenly the social matrix is subverted. It seems as if the Dopdi of the previous night, the representative of the tortured women class has died, and a new Draupadi is born out of the ashes. She protests against the entire hungry phallogocentric society and asks "what more can you do?" She pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts. This particular gesture of Dopdi is highly symbolic. Even Spivak includes this story in her collection of stories with the name "Breasts Stories." Breast is a source of food and livelihood. So it should be protected. And naturally it should be covered up with clothe. But gradually the society has invented the ideology where breast becomes more a symbol of sexuality, than that of motherhood and livelihood. So Dopdi's attack with her bare, wounded breasts is the subversion of the social matrix. The patriarchal hegemony is no more in their previous upper position. It is being marginalized slowly and continuously.

Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' is a metanarrative, capturing the effort of survival of the marginalised. It is the story of counter marginality against the collaborative power of social hegemony and patriarchy. It is a cry against 'othering' the rape victims; a message- how one can be one's own Lord Krishna.

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