

Political Suppression in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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'Man' is a general term that has been used since the evolution of human life to signify both genders; but man immersed in his proud, selfish interests has formulated ideologies and ethical principles whereby he established his authority over women whom he concluded were his slaves. Possessing a cloudy vision and a devious mind, he perceived 'man' in 'woman' and 'male' in 'female' and created an impression that she should always be his dependant. In order to protract this practice, he devised means and methods of regulating her actions, her thoughts, and even her desires. Since time immemorial, women have always remained the underdogs and have been made the victims of humiliation, torture and exploitation. The worst among all tortures was the establishment of his control over her body that would ensure her subordination as long as he wanted. Sexual violence must have thus originated in the sadistic minds of cruel men who at the same time created myths and legends about chastity and how chaste women were empowered with a supreme power equivalent to that of Gods to control the elements of the earth and the universe. Indian mythologies and legends have glorified Sita, Nalayani, Savitri, Damayanti, Kannagi and others for their virtues. Every woman therefore from her birth is taught to value her chastity more than anything else in this world. Any mode of violation of this virtue is attributed to death itself. As this belief strongly embedded itself in the minds of men and women, it also on the contrary gave rise to violence against women as a symbolic gesture of exploitation and disempowerment.

Mahasweta Devi, the noted Bengali writer disgusted by the modes of humiliation that the lower castes, especially the womenfolk, are subjected to and the champion of the cause of the 'Untouchables', is horrified by the game of politics that tries to break the spirit of men and women who fight for emancipation from slavery on behalf of their caste and clan. Hence she embarks on a project of presenting the shocking realities that happen behind the socio-economic and political iron curtains, through her most powerful work *Draupadi*.

The whole plot revolves around Dopdi Mejhen's career as a Naxalite. The term 'Naxalites' also referred to as the "Naxals" describes groups that adopt violent strategies against feudal landlords and others in power who exploit the poor landless labourers and the tribal people. Their claim is that they are fighting exploitation and oppression in order to create a society devoid of class structures and hierarchies.

The whole play is set in the tribal regions of Bengal, as is the case with almost all of Mahasweta Devi's stories. *Draupadi* or Dopdi Mejhen is a wanted Naxalite in the records of the State and the police with a heavy price on her head. She is apprehended by Senanayak and his army, gang raped in custody and deprived of food or water, but she refuses to be intimidated. The play ends with a magnificent finale in which she faces her abusers in stark, bloody nakedness questioning their very manhood.

Though the whole story revolves around Dopdi Mejhen's Naxal career as stated earlier, it is the final scene that has gained a lot of importance and attracted world wide criticism on the abuse of women and their sexuality. Mahasweta Devi presents harsh realities of the revolutionary movements in an

unrestrained fashion. She gives a true account of how a systematic genocide, silently authorised and legitimised by governmental institutions in the form of sexual assault and murder reduce the status of women belonging to the lower classes and the tribal groups to a subhuman level of existence. Nobody –be it the government or its agents who perpetrate the crimes – seems to suffer from any kind of guilt in doing so. Unfortunately, it is the victim who wilts under guilt and shame. Mahasweta Devi makes it very explicit through Draupadi's reaction that the physical body that experiences torture and humiliation is in fact a weapon in the hands of a woman to be brandished boldly against all forces of oppression that seek to subdue her personality and her status. Her reaction is an effective mode of resistance and transference of the guilt on to the shoulders of the perpetrator himself. It must be remembered that as has been said time and again in this chapter, violence against women is an extreme manifestation of gender inequality. The incidences of sexual violence against women in so-called civilised societies that faithfully follow male-dominated ideologies are definitely higher. Whenever somebody poses a threat or challenges the validity of these principles, physical abuse is resorted to as a binding act that ensures submission and obedience without any trace of opposition. The irony lies in the fact that patriarchal hegemonistic societies, which weave myths and legends about protecting the honour of women at all costs, at a given opportunity, make all attempts to violate it underlying the hypocrisy behind all ideals. All activists come under aggressive punishment from the powerful authorities. Women activists especially are intimidated by brutal treatment, which inevitably leads to sexual exploitation.

Looking at Draupadi from this viewpoint, one automatically understands that the rape of Draupadi is an act by chauvinistic men whose main aim is to subdue femininity. The whole plot is then, a riposte against a woman who has challenged the efficacy of Senanayak, a typical embodiment of patriarchal authority. Hence all attempts are made to subdue her spirits and kill her revolutionary enthusiasm. That is why she is subjected to gang rape as a prescribed punishment. Draupadi's body is mutilated by lustful men:

Something sticky under her arse and waist. Her own blood ... How many came to make her?

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts and understands that, indeed she's been made up right. It would please Senanayak now. Her breasts are bitten raw. The nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven. Then Draupadi has passed out. (Draupadi, 109).

At first, it is a sense of shame that pervades her. But soon, her tough spirits make her realise that her body is her weapon and her voice. Deprived of everything in life, she has to hold on to her physical self, which alone is her sole possession in this inhumane world. When struck with this comprehension, she realises that there is nothing for her to be ashamed about because, it is an immoral act practised on her by men who profess to be guardians of women's chastity. Once she understands this, she changes her nakedness into a powerful weapon. In a flash, the whole scene shifts. Her body that had earlier titillated lusty desires and projected her vulnerability now creates a sense of abhorrence and terror in Senanayak and his men. Trina Nileena Banerjee in "Written on the body" annotates the act clearly when she comments:

She makes it mean 'what she wants it to mean', turning male lust on its head and making the obscure object of desire/violence into a potentially disruptive object of horror. (Infochange India News features Agenda Drau.htm)

Draupadi's action raises her to superhuman proportions when she displays such extraordinary courage in the face of a dehumanising disaster.

Mahasweta Devi who is famous for reinventing epics and mythologies has wonderfully woven a story of exploitation round the ancient epic Mahabharatha to suit the modern industrial age. The story gains its significance with the disrobing of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, who was dragged to the centre of the court by Duchsasana. Staked and lost in a cunning game of dice by her husbands, she is dragged by the hair and forcibly brought to the court to be disrobed and cast as the servant of the Kauravas. She cries out in disbelief at her humiliation and seeks the help of the elders to protect her honour.

Then stretching out her arms and raising her flowing eyes in agonised supplication she cried in a voice broken with sobs:

If you have loved and revered the mothers who bore you
and gave you suck, if the honour of wife or sister or
daughter has been dear to you, if you believe in God and
Dharma, forsake me not in this horror more cruel than death!
(Mahabharatha, 93).

The elders and the wise men in the court of King Dhridarashtra where the incident takes place hang their heads in shame and helplessness as they hear her pleas. Duchsasana proceeds to disrobe her under the instructions of Prince Duryodhana. As he pulls her sari, she implores for Divine mercy:

O Lord of the World ... God whom I adore and trust, abandon me not in
this dire plight. You are my sole refuge. Protect me. (Mahabharatha, 94).

A miracle happens and Lord Krishna appears as a saviour. As she is stripped of her sari, yards and yards of cloth cover her body. Her honour that was at stake is redeemed by Divine intervention. The modern Draupadi in contrast, does not even appeal to the humanitarian considerations of her captors since she is sure that no help will arrive from any quarter. She is positively definite that since all morality and humanity has disappeared, no redeemer will save her from harassment; instead there are only predators all around waiting to attack and denude her. She does not entreat for divine benignity too. Hence she takes her own decision to boldly confront her offenders. Just as the Draupadi of the Mahabharatha swears not to tie up her hair that was dishevelled until Bhima smears the blood of Duchsasana, so too Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi refuses to wear the clothes that were forcibly removed from her body by Senanayak's men. The "making" of Draupadi is a violation of all moral codes prescribed for women by the lawmakers of a patriarchal society. There is none to avenge this insult because she belongs to the untouchable class. The abuse of a low caste woman is of no primary concern to anyone in a caste-ridden society. Had she belonged to the elite class, traditional moral codes would have been followed at all costs and if at all it had been violated, it would have exacted revenge and bloodshed as in the case of the epical Draupadi, whose humiliation culminated in the famous Kurukshetra War. The modern Draupadi has to fight her own battles of survival. Unfortunately her husband is dead and there is no one to take revenge on her abusers. When she realises this, she unhesitatingly violates all social norms as a

matter of hitting back at the lawmakers who are the law-breakers too. She throws off her clothes and prefers to remain naked as a symbol of rebellion. By defying the law, she records her protest against the abuse of her body which was the only thing that she had possessed all along and now even that has been despoiled by aggressive power-mongers. Draupadi of Mahabharata is the daughter of fire and therefore has a fiery nature. Her namesake, the modern Draupadi is also fierce in her resistance to all forms of oppression.

No one has so far dared to talk about rape or its aftermath as Mahasweta Devi has done in Draupadi. A constant supporter of the underdogs of the society, she tells through the protagonist that women who endure physical abuse and sexual assault need not suffer from distress or resort to suicide or indulge in any nefarious activities to seek vengeance. Their victimised physical body that has been misused and regimented by power wielding men can itself be transcribed to become an autonomous voice of fierce protest.

Mahasweta Devi makes her readers realise that rebellions and revolutions are forms of retaliation by the oppressed who are at the end of the tether. But the State and the police devise inhuman methods of suppression against the rebels and revolutionaries. The rape is symbolic of the untold horrors that were carried out during the grotesque suppression of 'The People's movement' (as the Naxalbari Movement was termed then) in the 1970s. It denotes the Government and its Establishments' endeavour to reduce its insurgents to the level of a trivial being. In this circumstance, Draupadi's nakedness and refusal to cover herself may be associated with the fact that the tribals would no longer flinch under pressure or humiliation, but enter into raw rebellion to fight courageously against the likes of Senanayak, without any trace of fear in their hearts. When confronted with such naked, fierce opposition, the ruling elite and their power-structures disintegrate and like Captain Arjan Singh retire from the scene helpless or like Senanayak remain terrified and dumb-struck with no hint of how to tackle the situation.

Draupadi is a scathing attack on the charades of the government and its various agencies that on the one hand, promise all kinds of privileges, rights and emancipation from all shackles and on the other hand, slyly deny them basic human constitutional rights and civil liberties. It is a play that exposes the powerful interplay of politics and history that has deprived a whole community of life's basic pleasures. Political exploitation in all its true colours is graphically expressed in a disquieting manner that leaves the reader guilty and ashamed. He experiences a pain that is neither cathartic in its effect nor therapeutic. Instead it is a continuous, nagging pain that lingers in the heart, a pain that creates a sense of loss of hope in humanity and makes one aware of the degeneracy and brutality of mankind. Yet at the same time, Mahasweta Devi openly celebrates the resilient spirit of the lower classes and the untouchables who display an immense mental toughness. Though the plot leaves the readers with a sense of shock and remorse, the Promethean nature of man, which is highly dominant among the oppressed that survive against all odds, instils a hope that they may change destinies and give a better future for generations to come. In this context, Draupadi's act can be seen as an act that subverts the exploitative system and empowers her. She is reborn again, this time with a powerful weapon against which there is no defence. The silence of all these torturous years is now broken and she has at last found her voice in her womanhood. "Her power becomes our humiliation." (Infochange India News). Thus Draupadi evolves into a special class

of women who rise above the ordinary. When women become victims of male dominance in many forms, they lose heart and feel sorry for themselves but here, Draupadi is made of sterner stuff. Even a tear that trickles involuntarily from her eyes shames her. She is not ashamed of her nakedness and turns her humiliated body into a weapon to taunt the male ego. She asks the question: "What more can you do?" (Draupadi, 110). Man is not man enough when women can ask the question as Draupadi did: "Can you clothe me?" (Draupadi, 110). Draupadi may have fallen, but she is not vanquished yet. Her resilience to torture and acceptance of what has happened to her body culminate in her accosting the perpetrators of the crime with the very body that was victimised. Rape is considered to be a highly personalised experience that can strengthen or destroy the mental make-up of a woman. Here, in the play, Draupadi gains empowerment from her brutal experience. The act of rape and victimisation was practised on her to weaken her spirits, but ironically, she is strengthened by it. What ultimately matters is that she survives in spite of her horrifying experiences. "He conquers who conquers himself." (Vincit qui se vincit).

Mahasweta Devi shrewdly culminates the action with Draupadi's nudity, thus transcending all bounds and crystallizing the moment in the readers'/ audiences' mind forever. Jyothi T. Rani and K. Katyayini in "Violence on Women in the Context of Indian Political Economy," quote a poem from Telugu translated into English by K. Purushotham that aptly sums up the whole situation:

Robbing and unrobing us,
 Became a symbol of his manliness.
 Whether it's in Bosnia or El Salvador
 Chalakurthi or a street in Trilokpuris
 The thick forest or wherever it may be
 Unrobing becomes their game of entertainment.
 The sexual violence over us has become their assertion
 of power
 Let's spit in hatred on the faces of
 These male chauvinist animals
 Grieving in shame and insult
 The parade of the naked has started.
 Questioning the unarbanity uncivilisation of the cloth clad
 Destroying the weapons of
 Nakedness, values and the culture of the clothes.
 (*Kakatiya Journal*, 132).

So too, Draupadi conquers her humiliation and pain and elevates herself victoriously to avenge her humiliation with her most powerful and only weapon, her body against which there are no defences. Even as she flaunts her femininity, she shakes herself free from the shackles of patriarchal values enjoined on woman to proclaim that no amount of cruelty and no authority in this world can buy her obedience at the cost of her conscience.

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