

Reinterpreting Myth in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract

Tales transgress from generations to generations under the realm of varied cultures and hence their comprehension through translation possibly takes numerous forms. Translating literature into English frequently acts as an instrument of empowerment of the marginalized sections of society especially the dalits, the tribes, and the women writers who deal with the struggle of creating solidarities across the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Indian society. Mahashweta Devi, in particular, happens to be the epitome of multi lingual translational practices in English. The present paper aims to analyze the spectrum of Mahasweta Devi's literary nuances into history that emanate from her 'subaltern' musings. In the role of a social activist Mahasweta Devi unleashes to her readers the lives of ordinary men, women, particularly Adivasi (tribal) people like the Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars, and Mundas, and other topics of social and political relevance. Her writings primarily associate with the issues related to the rights of the tribals.

Keywords: dalits, tribes, subaltern, politics, society

Introduction

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The term 'subaltern' as mentioned above deals with Antonio Gramsci's writings and emphasizes a subordinate position with relation to class, caste, race, and culture. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay entitled, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1985) popularized this terminology. 'Subaltern' and 'Feminist' histories, among others, encompass major dominant historiographical nuances that deconstruct the mainstream to decentralize it and reshape the national space with the voices of the marginals. Colin Mac Cabe in his forward to *In Other Worlds* opines on the articulation of gender in Mahashweta's writings as: "The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in its grounding in the gendered subaltern's body, in that female body which is never questioned and only exploited. The bodies of Jashoda and Dopdi figure forth the unutterable ugliness and cruelty which cooks in Third World kitchen to produce the First world feast that we daily enjoy."

The emotional curves and ironic intensities of Mahasweta's phrases multiple manifold when she depicts the tensions and struggles in the lives of the gendered marginals. She not only treats gender, class and race as analogous narratives; but also

takes them as interpenetrative figures. The co- editors of Women Writing in India, Susie Tharu and K. Lalithanote also voice the same feelings when they say: "Throughout Mahasweta Devi's varied fiction women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppression of caste and class. But in the best of her writing she quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, cast, and gender in the specific situations she depicts."

The present paper proposes to unleash Mahasweta's "Draupadi" whereby a Santhal tribal woman fights for the fundamental rights of her community. It would possibly critique the life of this tribal named Dopdi and the mythic Draupadi of the Mahabharata as both seem to be the caricatures of the 'life' canvas who have struggled irrespective of their peripheries for their legitimate rights, which were dethroned throughout their lives.

Myth as an essential source and vehicle of hegemonic control serves to contain and condition the responses of the marginalized 'other' as beautifully portrayed in Mahasweta's history of the subaltern which comes forth in the form of a dialogue against the oppressively hegemonic *Itihas Puranichistory* of India. The dominant symbol/myths embodied in her texts are devastated just like the cultural-historical texts like Vedas, Puranas, and *Ramayana and Mahabharata*. Again In "Untapped Resources", she pronounces: "It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and Puranas interesting; I use them with a new interpretation." (UR17)

She takes the readers into the Brahminical history by aptly re-deploying the mythical narratives. The pre-historic narratives comprehended in the text are re-constructed and reshaped from the perspective of the oppressed voices. Myth, as deciphered in her texts, signifies a sense of cultural contest over an interaction between the center and the periphery. Only by installing the narratives of myth, Mahasweta devi portrays the incessant instincts of exploitation from the age of the Mahabharata to the

contemporary times. Her de-mythification of the patriarchal myths deceive her wish to innovate a gender neutral national culture space. Instead of opting for the passive mythical investment of women in the figures of Sati, Savitri she successfully resurrects and reinvents renowned mythical figures like Draupadi and Shakti. Mahasweta Devi visualizes a potential for nationalist reorientation in these mythical figures. She describes the tribals, dalits and women merely not as passive subjects but as agile agents of the nation's ethnocultural and historiopolitical ethos. Instead of destroying the intricacies of myths she indulges with these deconstructive theories to eventually recast them as the metaphors of empowerment and affirmation

Her stories, like "Draupadi", "Breast Giver", couple with the Indian epic culture as crystallized in the edicts of Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Through these tales, Mahasweta Devi attempts attempt to "brahmanize" two-thousand year old narrative tradition on the contemporary canvas. Mahasweta's iconic tales serve as counter hegemonic platter since they enact the history of repression/violence written within the mythical narratives. By relating to her re-construction of subaltern history by creating an alternate mythical discourse, Radha Chakravorty effectively puts forward: "One of the most notable features of Mahasweta Devi's writings is the visionary, utopia or myth-making impulse that acts as a counterbalancing to her dystopian, "forensic", critical perspective on the contemporary world." (RMSF 69)

Referring to Mahasweta's dealings with myths, Maitreya Ghatak also says that: "whether it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher shares of the crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, the remain the hallmark of her fiction especially the little known, little landed struggles which are part of everyday life and don't necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media". (Ghatak, 2000, p.10-11)

The lives of downtrodden, tribals, their rebellions, their requirements and their protests never find any substantial description in the mainstream history books. Hence by showcasing her literary deftness, Mahasweta gives them a voice because she thinks it to be an ethical responsibility on the part of an author to make their voices heard.

Dopdi, the female protagonist in her sensational text "Draupadi" is a refurbished and demythicised incarnation of the epical Draupadi who belongs to the Santhal tribe. In her reincarnation, she is framed within contemporary and historical contexts where her inheritance is shifted to Champabhumi of Bengal and her current status is described to be that of an activist of the naxalite movement of the seventies, in the northern part of West Bengal and also a fugitive on the run from the police. Dopdi is a gendered subaltern. As a woman belonging to the lowest strata of the economic class, she in turn is subjected to double subalternization. Her oppressed level is further deteriorated by the atrocious dealings of her caste.

Mahasweta Devi inverts the legacy of cultural nationalism by reinterpreting the story of the most powerful female characters of Mahabharata, Draupadi, in her story "Draupadi". She displaces Draupadi from her place in royal kingdom and places her into the forest area of the Jharkhani belt as a tribal woman. Mahasweta reinterprets the tragic incident of Draupadi's disrobing, one of the famous episodes of this cultural religious text. Unlike her mythological namesake, Mahasweta Devi's

Dopdi gets stripped in the dark and dreadful wild world of a jungle where no divine power comes to her rescue. She gets trapped into a situation where she is forced to act for herself. Physical violence, verbal abuse and other forms of aggressions have always been incorporated as instruments to control a women's body. It is always 'the woman's body' that is both the object of desire and the subject of control. Dopdi, as she is apprehended, tortured, gangraped, brutalized all through the night, neither expects nor receives salvation from any quarter. She doesn't wash, nor allows the rapists to clothe her the next morning. By disallowing her torture, rape and nakedness to intimidate her and instead by using these as weapons to insult and browbeat the enemy, Dopdi inverts the whole system of significations that the epic is based upon. This particular episode of Mahabharata assigns sexual assault and nakedness, i.e., shame, loss and fear to consolidate the manipulations of power. Mahasweta's Dopdi ironically reverses the semiotics of these signs to incarnate a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare amongst the male-dominated societal hierarchies.

Dopdi's defiance is absolute and is unsupported or intervened by any divine male power. The mythological Draupadi pray fully asks for this divine 'male power' to come to her rescue. Draupadi of Mahabharata comes across as a hapless, helpless feminine figure, desperately seeking help from paternal powers in her predicament. On the other hand we have Mahasweta's daring Dopdi who emerges out as a strong female who is full of life and self-respect and never seeks help from anybody. She is herself too self-dominating to let the patriarchal norms of morality to subjugate her and hence redefines the inherited patriarchal construct of sexual 'honour' of a woman. She defies the authoritative state of the nation that perpetuates violence and terror through its capillaries. Gangraped by police, Dopdi staunchly denies to be touched upon or to be clothed by those men in uniform.

In her re-depiction of Draupadi, Mahasweta not only localizes her name ("Draupadi" is de-sanskritised and vernacularized to "Dopdi") but also indigenizes her location also. Her Dopdi is a queen of jungles, an offspring of mother nature and thus her love for freedom and disregard attempts to control and curtail forms an integral part of her basic instincts. Senanayak, a representative of modern patriarchal world-order in the story, while supporting Dopdi and her cause in theory, attempts a total decimation of the resisting "object" in practice. After disrobing Dopdi with his strategies of maneuvering, Senanayak orders her "making". Dopdi's abuse doesn't stop short at the dignified, refined limits of an attempted "vastraharan" (an act of forced disrobing) of the epic variety, it entails an absolute "making" of her exercised over 'a billion moon', 'a million light years' (Draupadi 34).

'Draupadi' beautifully out performs the epic in terms of the ravages which are incorporated as well as borne upon by the victim. Unlike her mythological mate, Dopdi doesn't seek any divine intervention in the court of a 'Maharaja'; rather it is the wild space of a forest. Dopdi gets no divine male rescuer. The janitors offer her a piece of cloth to hide after subjecting her to multiple-rape throughout the night. Dopdi, in the fit of rage pours down the water, tears the cloth to pieces and blatantly refuses to cover herself up with the male-defined notions of 'shame' and 'female modesty'. Covering herself up would have been a reaffirmation or a fortification of the patriarchal mode of morality sanctified by the 'manly' ideologies that subjugate

'female honor' and 'breach of woman's modesty and her subject hood'. Spivak reinstates the power of Dopdi when she "acts in 'not acting'". (*In Other Worlds* 95). However, the effectiveness of Dopdi's resistance is not the refusal to act, but the refusal to act predictably. She redefines the conventional "sexual honour" of a woman when she comes out naked and confronts Senanayak. Unlike the mythological Draupadi, she resists guilt, fear, shame or servility that are typically associated with the discourse of her "making"(in shame and servility), Dopdi challenges the ravager to "kounter" her and instead of lamenting over the "respectability", she steps ahead and boldly s questions the masculinity of the so called patriarchal construct.

"Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand.

Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, 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 to spit a bloody gab at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed.

I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, Kounter me- Come on, Kounter 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".

(Draupadi 36-37)

This blatant action of Dopdi's completely dislocates and belittles the disciplined 'resistance' displayed by Draupadi's lamentations as she attempts to awaken the masculine powers of the great patriarchs in the grand Mahabharata. In this startling metamorphosis of the powerless tribal woman who confidently challenges the patriarch power of a ruthless postcolonial nation-state embodied in character of Senanayak is a true message to our society. Draupadi confronts Senanayak, collapses his false masculinist pride and challenges him to 'Kounter' her. Draupadi appears like a victim but her actions make her an agent. The binary of victim and agent fall apart as Draupadi deftly violates from victimhood. As she stands insistently naked before her mongers, Dopdi manages to wield her raped body as a weapon to terrify them. By refusing the disciplining power of shame scripted into the act of rape, Draupadi becomes, in the words of Mahasweta Devi's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a "terrifying super object".(Spivak 1988,184). The terrific characterisation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts before the readers: the subaltern and oppressed woman can be represented in imaginative writing and she can be represented as an "agent". Thus, Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' effectively dismantles Spivak's contention in her essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" that "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (1994:104). In the representation of Dopdi we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks aloud - literally and metaphorically since her 'voice...is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp that makes her audible to the whole world.

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