

## **A Review of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi": Female Body as the Site of Power**

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In the nineteenth-century, the female body was deemed to be the reason why women were held incapable of participating in society, from athletics to politics. Definitions of the female body were used as a form of social control and discipline. Nineteenth-century women were taught to believe that weakness was their natural condition. Therefore they could not perform any acts that required physical or mental exertion. This dominant discourse is one where the female body is constricted by psychologically training women to accept that their body is inferior. This assures control of the female through the control of her body.

The relation between men and women is illustrative of the relation between Bourgeois and Proletariat where men play the role of the bourgeoisie. Men, much like the Bourgeois, enjoy dominance over women because they are the productive labourers, but when a woman tries to enter their sphere, she is faced by harassment, psychological and physical violence, which manifests as an expression of their resentment and their need to reassert control. If gender discrimination forces women into lower-paying jobs, sexual harassment helps keep them there. Susan Brownmiller in her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) writes, "Man's discovery that his genitalia would serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries in prehistoric time, along with the use of fire and the first crude axe. This single factor may have been sufficient to have caused the creation of a male ideology of rape" (19) and man's efforts to subjugate the woman is the "longest sustained battle the world has ever known" (308). Rape therefore, creates a climate of intimidation and repression. Rapes can also be comprehended through the axis of class hierarchy, where upper caste men, when perceive a crossing of boundaries on the part of lower caste women, attempt a backlash in terms of sexual assault aimed at teaching their victims a lesson, instilling fear in them to adhere to traditional norms. The same has been pointed out by Maya John in her article titled "Class Societies and Sexual Violence: Towards a Marxist Understanding of Rape" (2013), with reference to the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2012 Delhi gang-rape case. Rape, thus, becomes a medium of demonstrating caste hierarchy and power.

In Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1981), the female protagonist Draupadi, also known as Dopdi Mejhen, exemplifies just the opposite of the role that is assigned to her by the patriarchal society. Dopdi is a twenty-

seven-year-old, lower caste poor woman who is actively involved in the Naxalite Movement with her husband Dulna. As a Naxalite activist Dopdi becomes a threat in the eyes of the police authority, who are again privileged men possessing power.

What remains remarkable is that after having been violated Draupadi is not ashamed of her naked body. She walks naked towards Senanayak with her head held high. She turns her victimised body into a weapon to taunt the male ego. Her sex which was supposed to be a “terrible wound” (Devi 25) turns into her strength now. She chooses to find strength in her body the very site which was considered vulnerable and therefore the easiest target for her oppressors. As “she pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts” (Devi 33), Dopdi turns her brutalised body, which was the symbolic site of conquest, into a weapon to be employed against her rapist, inspiring fear in him and thus denying him the power associated with raping. She says, “I will not let you put my cloth on me” (Devi 33). Her body’s status as a target is inverted with the re-appropriation of power which she comes to embody. Because of her autonomy, her nakedness becomes a slight to the masculinity of the attacker. Devi takes the resistance a stage further empowering Dopdi not only with the last word but also the power to re-appropriate her raped body.

Due to the social connotation of dishonour and loss of chastity associated with rape a woman who has been sexually violated is expected to be doomed in shame and guilt. This disposition of society leads most victims to remain mute and never raise their voice against their predators, thus giving rise to a culture where sexual repression and assault subsists naturally. Interestingly, Dopdi denies the shame imposed on her by her oppressors. The attempt of her oppressors to reduce her being to an object is nullified by the power that she comes to personify. This reveals her courage and strength in spite of being a rape victim. “Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing” (Devi 33). By deconstructing the whole notion of shame associated with rape Dopdi refuses to be guilt-ridden and in turn enlightens the fact that the victimiser should be shamefaced and not the victim. She stains Senanayak’s white bush shirt, which is a mark of his supposed civility, with her bloody spit and boldly asserts “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed” (Devi 33), thus, reclaiming the subjectivity of her body and making it symptomatic of voice and power.

Diana Maury Robin in her book, *Redirecting the Gaze: Gender, Theory, and Cinema in the Third World* (1998), expresses her concerns with women’s body fluids such as tears, breast milk and vaginal blood which help to anchor the specificity of female victimisation. They are modes of exploitation and commodification of the female body. In the story, the protagonist’s “vagina is

bleeding” (Devi 31) and “a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye” (Devi 31). The story, thus, gives a searing description of the abuse to which a female body is subjected in order to gain autonomy over it. However, the protagonist, poignant in her suffering, displays invincible courage to rise above this abuse and refuses to let herself be victimised by her oppressors.

When Dopdi is first captured by the men, she is brought under their control by their power over her body. Her body is colonised, in the sense that she has no power over it. It is only when Dopdi decides to regain control over her body, can she resist her oppression and walk naked before Senanayak, making him feel intimidated. Dopdi’s naked body, which according to the overbearing colonial ethos, is supposed to be an object of shame, now only represents the meaning which Dopdi chooses to afford it with. It is noteworthy that though Senanayak might act like the colonialist, Dopdi does not show any of the characteristics of the colonised, which is meekness, silence and a tendency to follow the order of the coloniser. She protests from the periphery and her acts of refusing to wear clothes and spitting on Senanayak may be read as acts of defiance against all representatives of ‘Empires’. She makes it dawn on them that he can order her to be stripped but cannot force her to be clothed. In this way, his control over her is only limited and therefore of not much consequence

According to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Dopdi’s refusal to be shamed or diminished should not be read as a “transcendence of suffering, or even simply as heroism” (352). It is instead she states, “simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape, like shame, fear, loss). It is, further, an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy” (352). Thus refusing to share the sign system, she also becomes unpredictable. This is significant for her emergence as an agent because, for the first time, Senanayak with all his theoretical knowledge of the tribals, fails to anticipate her moves. Her actions become incomprehensible in the systematic referential sign system of the upper caste male-dominated culture.

Conventional interpretations would like to trace Dopdi’s courage at the end of the story to a feminine strength innate in women. However, it has to be remembered that she is essentially not spared an option, therefore being resilient is the only course she could take for she would never betray her people. She takes pride in her mission as a political activist and that is where her strength as a heroine comes from.

Gayatri Spivak in her “Introduction” to *Breast Stories* notes that Mahasweta Devi rewrites and inverts the episode of Draupadi from the Hindu mythology. While the mythological Draupadi was saved from humiliation by

divine intervention, Dopdi emerges victorious by reclaiming her autonomy over her body. We can therefore conclude by saying that the story eggs on women to be their own heroes rather than wait for their knight to rescue them, thus commencing a revisionist ethos. Equality between the sexes can only come into being when we stop seeing ourselves as the victim and start taking charge of our lives.

### **Works Cited and Consulted**

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