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Of Draupadi and Dopdi—a Re-reading of the Agitprop in Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi'



Dr. Aparajita Hazra

Professor & Head, Dept. of English

SKB University, West Bengal, India

Email ID : dr.aparajitahazra@gmail.com

Abstract :

Mahasweta Devi—Laura Mulvey—DopdiMejhen—Jacques Lacan—Senanayak--Michel Foucault—the ensemble of names does seem a tad bewildering at first glance. Yet, one read of Mahasweta Devi's agitprop of a short story Draupadi would suffice to show how the author ropes in the intricacies of the theory of the Gaze to propagate the racking psychomachia that the titular DraupadiMejhen goes through, followed by her ironical triumph over the predatory beurocracy after a heartwrenching bout of angst.

Keywords : Gaze, psychomachia, agitprop, beurocracy, angst

Research Paper :

Introduction :

The short story 'Draupadi', was first brought out in *Agnigarbha* ("Womb of Fire"), a gamut of loosely threaded together, short politico-moral narratives. The story—set against the backdrop of the turbulent Naxalite Movement in Bengal and Jharkhand—holds up the desperate hunt for the 'terrorist' Naxalites around 1970-71, who were carrying out a thorough and deft guerrilla attack on the administrative system while hiding out in the jungles of Jharkhani. The story finally zeroes in on DulnaMajhi and DopdiMejhen—a couple of Santhaltribals who were ferociously hand-in-glove with the Naxalites. Acting as informers for the Naxal leaders and as surreptitious guides who knew the labyrinthine depths of the forests like the backs of their hands, it did not take long for Dulna and Draupadi—shortened down to the more convenient Dopdi—to shoot up to the top of the 'Wanted' list in the Police station. Dulna gets 'eliminated' first—shot mercilessly into a limply spread-eagled lifelessness, as he crouched over a stream, drinking with the alert surreptitiousness of a hunted animal. Dopdi goes on the run—weaving her way urgently in silent desperation through the green maze of the unkempt forest—her heart bleeding all the while for her dead Dulna—lying lifeless, alone and defenceless to the voracious rapacity of vultures and wild animals in the forest. The moment of triumph comes finally for the Senanayak—the leader of Operation Bakuli—as Dopdi is 'apprehended' and dragged to the Senanayak's camp. After preliminary interrogation, the Senanayak leaves for dinner—not before muttering the orders for his waiting team: 'Make her'.

And DraupadiMejhen was 'made'—brutally, mercilessly, until her stripped, torn, naked, bleeding body could take no more. She was violated, raped, beaten, bitten and flayed—mortified—humiliated—crushed—to the ravenous body-hunger of the keepers of law until she passed out.

Research question :

The storyline intrigues one as it takes a turn for the very unexpected at the end. As long as Draupadi was raped, tortured and humiliated, it was heart wrenching but explicable in terms of male show of phallocentrism. When Draupadi lay naked and spread-eagled and bloodied on a charpoy outside the Police Chowki, and 'the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her', making her close her eyes in shame, it is still explicable—both the leering perversion of the guard as well as her shamed femininity.

But then suddenly something happens that belies the conventional normalcy of expectation:

‘Suddenly there is trouble. Draupadi sits up as soon as she hears "Move!" and asks, Where do you want me to go? To the Burra Sahib's (Highest Officer's) tent.

Where is the tent? Over there. Draupadi fixes her red eyes on the tent. Says, Come, I'll go. The guard pushes the water pot forward. Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, She's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior. The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind. What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, DopdiMejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? Where are her clothes? Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them. 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, and sharp as her ululation, 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 a bloody gob 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, 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.’(402)

The proposition here is that this utterly unconventional ending to this tale of horror has a lot to do with the Gaze theory as Lacan and Mulvey and Bracha L. Ettinger propagated it.

Mythological bias :

DopdiMejhen is actually DraupadiMejhen- a name that was culled probably in blissful ignorance to its implications by her parents from the myths of the Mahabharata. Draupadi—the one married to five husbands—five protectors—and yet who had to suffer through the mortifying humiliation of being unrobed by Duryodhan in a crowded court—Draupadi, the one who had to gnash her teeth through the smarting frustration and hurt of seeing her husbands –in all their plurality—watching her as if helplessly.

Yet when Mahasweta Devi creates her Draupadi, or rather recreates a Dopdi out of the clichéd Draupadi, she brings forth a strong woman who can stand up for herself. Instead of expecting to be protected by a *man* from humiliation, she *herself* figures out a way of turning that humiliation on its head. Instead of expecting to be *protected* from the humiliation meted out to her by a ruthlessly phallogocentric system, she turns her humiliation into a boomerang reversal of coercion. When she walks up to Senanayak in all her bloodied nakedness, triumphantly describing herself to the Senanayak as ‘The object of your search, DopdiMejhen’, she actually posits herself smack in the centre as subject. She becomes the doer, instead of being done upon. As Gayatri Spivak reasoned in the Foreword to her translation of the text, ‘She is... what Draupadi—written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power-could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction.’

The Gaze Theory as Lacan put it:

Jacques Lacan believed that the mind around its mirror stage, encounters an anxiety that comes with the knowledge that one can be seen or viewed or ‘gazed’ at. This, in the imaginary register of the psyche, makes the subject lose a certain amount of her/his autonomy as a psychological fallout of realizing that she/he is visible, and therefore, an object.

Thus when Draupadi’s body was laid bare to the ‘gaze’ of the numerous and lecherous policemen, she was posited as a justified and easy victim of the anxiety of the Gaze. The men who had her in their power—or so they thought—for they were soon to be proved pitifully wrong—were basically banking on their long conditioned social belief that the woman would cringe in shame and humiliation at being exposed to the male ‘gaze’ that they would lasciviously ogle her with.

The shock and the twist came when Draupadi, clothed in nothing but her own blood and dignity—dared them to look at her—to ‘gaze’ at her—to see her—with her mutilated, bloodied and tortured body that would only scream out their own shameless brutality to them.

Conclusion :

The whole point that Mahasweta Devi makes in the astoundingly unprecedented ending of the story is all to do with caustic subversion—subversion of the modalities of control that age-old patriarchy has exerted and grown used to on submissive femininity. When the Senanayak got Draupadi ‘apprehended’ his gleeful satisfaction was not only that to do with the contentment of the completion of an assignment. It was more of the lusty triumph of a predator having been able to get a vice-like stranglehold over a long-elusive prey. When he gave orders to his men to ‘make’ her, he was practically playing the hunter throwing the bits of his ‘catch’ to his hungry dogs—with the anticipation of voyeuristic thrill of watching them tear their prize to shreds and devouring the beaten, racked and conquered prey with voracious rapacity.

The uncanny twist took all of the ‘men’ there by extreme surprise when Draupadi—the supposed-to-be-helplessly-at-their-mercy prey—by then naked, bleeding and torn—turns the tables on them and advances towards them, daring them to ‘look’ at her—leaving the men absolutely nonplussed and baffled in a *terra incognita* as to how to deal with this open challenge to what they so far had been wont to call their ‘masculinity’:

‘You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? ...Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand ...’(402)

Draupadi—the all-too-familiar DopdiMejhen leaves them feeling emasculated and fuming in the throes of castration anxiety :

‘Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob 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, counter me—come on, counter me-?’(402)

The motif of ‘masculinity’—‘*mardanggi*’—is even more contextually placed in India—specially the upper part of it—as issues can even take a turn for the fatal where masculinity is challenged. So, positing Mahasweta Devi’s short story against that socio-psychological backdrop one can plumb the insularity of Dopdi’s subversion of the habituated triumph of

masculine vanity. That is how Dopdi answers back. That is how Dopdi subverts. That is how Dopdi slashes in the male complacency born out of the banality of gendered evil.

And that is how Mahasweta Devi makes her point for the downtrodden proletariat masses who strive relentlessly in their daily struggle with life.

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