



Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi* : A Feministic and Gender Perspective Analysis



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Abstract :

This paper focuses on a feministic and gender perspective analysis in *Draupadi*. The word gender evokes a stimulated reaction particularly in today's atmosphere of continuous debates questioning the senility of our society in the wake of multiple incidents of discrimination based on Gender reported across the globe. When the focus is concentrated mainly on the Indian society, gender becomes the basis for deciding the fate of the subject, even in the matters concerning the basics such as birth and death in the form of selective abortion of the female foetus. In the gender biased patriarchal Indian society, most of the women are considered secondary, are subjugated and exploited for being women. India's vast history has glimpses of innumerable examples corroborating the stated claim. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's bold step protesting practice of sati system in the early part of the 20th century was instrumental in stunting gender related bias existing in society. The practice of Sati, the illogical practice no more exists due to the intervention of social activists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The other deep-rooted sexist practices, which continue to haunt Indian women, have today reached the peak resulting in groups of individuals

and activists protesting and demanding strict action against the perpetrators of gender bias.

Apart from gender bias, another prominent aspect of social sphere that is visible in her works is "Identity" and its related issues. Identity is the primary bone of contention in any society, Indian society being no exception has made the individuals burn their life's oil in establishing it. They expect identity to be unique. In the era of globalization, identity being no longer safe can be lost, stolen or destroyed. This leaves individuals in utter state of insecurity. This complexity is another aspect in Mahashweta Devi's fiction. Her works *Rudali*, *Draupadi*, *Dust on the Road*, *Bitter Soil* and *The Queen of Jhansi* are highly contentious of these issues demanding systematic critical analysis and deciphering. The present paper titled "Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi*: A Feministic and Gender perspective analysis" is an attempt to analyze highly appreciated work of Mahashweta Devi, *Draupadi*.

Keywords : Gender, Feminism, Identity, Bias, Exploitation, Subjugation, Mahashweta Devi

Research Paper :

The assertion long believed that only a dalit can present a Dalit's perspective on the problems afflicting the dalit community, over which most of the early dalit literature was judged and validated was proved wrong by writers like Rabindarnath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, Arundati Suzzane Roy, Girish Karnad etc. these non Dalit writers succeeded through their literature in presenting a realistic picture of Dalit life which even the Dalit writers applauded. Among all the non Dalit writers mentioned, Mahasweta Devi stands out due to her skill in capturing the true essence of Dalit experience. The researcher with a humane approach attempts to evaluate The Themes of Gender and Identity in Mahashweta Devi's Fiction.

Mahasweta Devi born in 1926 is an Indian author and comes from a family of Brahman writers. Both parents wrote and so did her bother as well as her Devi's son who became a celebrated author. Mahasweta Devi went on to teach at Bijoygarh College while also becoming a journalist and creative writer. She has also become well-known for becoming a social activist and bringing attention to the lives of those who are not economically powerful and does not have the loudest voices.

Mahasweta Devi's short stories and novels bear testimony to the fact that she is a true representative of the voice of the subalterns particularly women. The major characters in her works like Jashoda, Draupadi, Dhowli, Doulati, and Gangor represent the vulnerable picture of the gendered subaltern and sometimes the human condition shown in these literary works presents a very gloomy and cursed picture of the female Dalit characters. One of her short stories "Doulati the Bountiful" sums up the plight of all the subaltern women who are sexually and economically exploited "Doulati is all over India" (Imaginary Maps: Three Stories: 1995, 160). In her epic essay on subaltern studies "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak comments "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow than subaltern men" and this holds true and is reflected even in Mahasweta Devi's work too. Though Spivak's extremely exclusive use of the term subaltern leaves an impact generally, the more refined definition by Robert Young defining subalternity as including "subordinated classes and peoples" (Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction: 2003), appears more sensible.

The Bengali writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi revisits the mythological story of Draupadi in her much acclaimed short story 'Draupadi'. The story was published in her work *Agnigarbha* in 1978. The English reading world got to appreciate the work through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of her collection of short stories entitled *Breast Stories* (2010). The story has at its backdrop the Naxalbari movement of Bengal which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against the landlords and money lenders. It triggers the traumatizing experiences of male voyeurism and chauvinism that indulge for a national debate of dalit feminist narrative.

Mahasweta Devi constructs the pretensions of civil society to transparency, equity, and justice; and deliberations of social reality to margin and center in the limelight of double polarization. Culler's "difference by differing" with sexual identity and Anderson's "pluralisation of difference" across race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are suggested in "Draupadi." Spivak asserts, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. The subaltern [as woman] cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away". "Draupadi" depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body and her inner feminine core to fight against her marginality. Here, the woman's body becomes an instrument of vicious denunciation of patriarchy and hegemony, which are ironical, counter-canonical, anti-literary, and contradictory. "Thus 'woman' is caught between the interested "normalization" of capital and the regressive "envy" of the colonized male?" The curtailment of women's voice is a consequence of the paternalistic society's discipline and it institutionalizes female agency. The representation of gendered subaltern as an "empty space," a "blank agency," and the "sexed specificity of the female body" that leadsto the problematic conclusion: colonialism in collusion with patriarchy effects complete erasure of the woman. The gendered female is rendered 'as mute as ever' and 'is more deeply in shadow' when the epistemic violence mingles with advanced civilization, and rejects 'tolerance' for their empowerment. In "Draupadi," the victim's body is brutally abused with unutterable ugliness since she speaks with her body, and the biting irony confounds the traditional polarization of cultural and biological aspects. Beauvoir says, "If the respect or fear inspired by woman prevents the use of violence towards her, then the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power".

"Draupadi" embodies 'hegemonic masculinity,' 'female emancipation,' 'double colonization,' 'societal power relations,' 'centre-periphery articulation,' 'master-slave dialectics,' and 'gender-bender dynamics.' In "Draupadi," the erotic object transforms into an object of torture and revenge where the line between heterosexuality and gender-violence conjures. These contextual factors account for the quantity of women's politicization and the quality of women's political life. "Draupadi" offers the trivial shifts from "customs and traditions" to "barbaric," then to "violence against women," and finally to "rights violation". Rinehart's pentastages of "passive acceptance," "revelation," "embeddedness," "synthesis," and "active commitment" contribute to dalit feminist consciousness. To Reid and Nuala, gendered consciousness characterizes "sense of

interdependence and shared fate with other women,” “recognition of women’s low status and power with men,” “attribution of power differentials to institutionalized sexism,” and “improvement of women’s position in society”.

Devi asserts, “... the human being is not made for the sake of politics”. She declares, “I was writing her to be read, and I was certain not claiming to give her a voice. So if I’m read as giving her a voice, there again this is a sort of transaction of the positionality between the Western feminist listener who listens to me, and myself, signified as a Third World informant. What we do toward the texts of the oppressed is very much dependent upon where we are”. Spivak contextualizes ‘the conflictual topos of language’ and insists the failure of condemnation: “...power, hierarchy, and responsibility for other futures, other contexts, other beings”. “...whose critiques do we especially try to understand and respond to; whom do we read; where do we look for ways of thinking that might wake us up?”

“Draupadi” is a tribalized reincarnation of a mythical Draupadi, and the tale of ‘rape-murder-lockup torture’ in police custody. It captures the torturing experience of Santhal tribe, Draupadi Mejhen with multi-faced personality. “Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal, she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the ancient Draupadi ...They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names”. She cannot pronounce even her name because of the dalit tongue and dialect. “The story is a moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the one hand, a law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression, on the other, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles”. The tale exposes the dalit feminist consciousness in its initial exposition itself: “What’s this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name?” Dopdi and Dulna are married couple, active workers in Naxalbari movement and fights for their prime necessities. After Dulna’s murder, Draupadi is brutally molested by the policemen in their attempts to extract information about the fugitives.

Senanayak, the army chief, with Keatsian ‘negative capability’ torments Dopdi. As a counter-offense, she tears her clothes and makes herself naked as a figure of refusal in front of Police authorities, and displaying her crushed body. Rajan comments, “Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, the horror of rape diminish her. It is simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter effects of shame confusion and terror in the enemy”. She is at a distance from the political activism of the male and the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female. Her confidence and courage dare to look at the public without any hesitation. She laughs weirdly with the blind acceptance of humiliation, corruption, molestation and disentangled chain of patriarchal shame. Her stubborn refusal to cover herself humiliates the male officers. She is defiant with self protest, charms with counter-resistance and retaliation and celebrates the ‘woman-power’ with honour, diversity and resolution. She experiences the subaltern woman within the context of historical juncture of ‘interregnum’ where woman are concerned with its connotation of violation, imposition of force, destruction of psyche, and alignment of victimization. As Draupadi’s revenge excerpts: “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” Her legitimized pluralization, in singularity is used to demonstrate male glory. Spivak says, “Mahasweta’s story questions this ‘singularity’ by placing Dopdi first in a comradely, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape”. “Draupadi” shares the cultural memories with ‘secret encounters with singular figures,’ but its ‘subject- representation and constitution is deliberately palimpsest and contrary”.

The story culminates into Draupadi’s postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference in challenging man to (en) counter as un/ mis- recorded objective historical monument. Here, the female nudity questions the enemy: “negation of negation”, and thus, Hegel’s double negation is superimposed. She projects as an ‘unarmed target’ and a ‘terrifying super object’ with her horrifying gestures: “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed... What more can you do?” Dopdi’s action is “a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities [...] that has become apparent, at least after a general review of the facts” which becomes a repressive response to the superior power. Michel Foucault entitles it as ‘instrument- effect’ which explains the reverse mode of protest against perversion of [male] power. It also imposes that Dopdi’s consumed body becomes an instrumental strike back against the suppression of superior authority. “Draupadi” serves an exemplum for the dictum: “your sex is a terrible wound”. Here, the female body acts as a weapon for resistance, the female body speaks as a sword for identity, and the female body epitomizes as a synecdoche for survival. The tale explores the conflicts between remnant colonial morality and subalternity. From the root epic Mahabharatha onwards, the brutal cannibalistic exploitation and molestation begin with Draupadi’s public unrobing. “Draupadi” is a reincarnation of mythical Draupadi, as both parallels the inherent semiotics of subjugation.

Gramsci’s cultural hegemony represents the dominant groups in society (ruling class), that maintain dominance by securing the ‘spontaneous consent’ of subordinate groups (working class), through negotiated construction of political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. Foucault states,

“power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere,” but it is diffused and embodied in scientific discourse, knowledge, “meta-power,” and “regimes of truth” in constant flux pervades in society.

The quintessential question Can the Subaltern speak? indoctrinates the female subjectivity and problematizes the lower-caste women through the blind spot of the stereotypical version “Draupadi.” “Spivak questions the subaltern’s ability to speak ‘for herself’ and suggests that if the subaltern is speaking, she is not a subaltern anymore and that the terms determined for her speech will affect what is going to be said and how her voice will be heard. Therefore, she is suspicious of attempts to retrieve a pure form of subaltern consciousness and suggests that the effort to produce a transparent or authentic subaltern is a desire of the intellectual to be benevolent or progressive that ends up silencing the subaltern once again”. Spivak’s conviction of ‘speaking about’ and ‘speaking for’ the female gender manifests the elite mainstream intrusion thwarted in “Draupadi.” Devi’s “Draupadi” illustrates.

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