

Political Suppression in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi

Mostafizar Rahaman

Research Scholar, Coochbehar, West Bengal, India

“I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society.... I ask myself this question a thousand times: Have I done what I could have done?”- Mahasweta Devi.

Mahasweta Devi is a reputed Indian writer who was born in the year 1926 into a middle class Bengali Hindu Brahmin family in Dacca now in Bangladesh. She writes within the parameters of class Marxist ideology and evinces a keen interest in history in many of her novels. In fact, her novel *‘Jhansir Rani or Rani of Jhansi’* demonstrates an interest in both history and her woman protagonist. She is a 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 socioeconomic and political iron curtains, through her most powerful work *‘Draupadi’*.

The story documents the economic, political, social and sexual oppression of the Dalit women in tribal areas who suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender. It is about the 1967 peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of West Bengal by the landless peasants and the itinerant farm workers against the unofficial state-feudal nexus.

The whole story revolves around DopdiMejhen'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 story has its backdrop, the Naxalbari movement of Bengal, which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and money lenders.

Mahasweta Devi's tribal Dopdi is fighting for her survival, for food and for water. The writer etches out the plight of the tribal in words. She depicts how utter helplessness can finally lead to resistance or even rebellion. They went underground for a long time and they are on the list of wanted. They used the technique of guerrilla warfare to compete with their enemy. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of such fighters, for they too killed with hatchets and scythes, bows and arrows.

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 DopdiMejhen 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.

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”

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 Mahabharata 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!”***(Mahabharata, 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”***. (Mahabharata, 94).

No one has so far dared to talk about rape or its aftermath as MahaswetaDevi 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 us 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**’ (termed Naxalbari Movement) 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 tribal 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. 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. 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). 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).

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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