



Identifying “Draupadi” as a Political Figure in the Works of Mahasweta Devi & Heisnam Kanhailal

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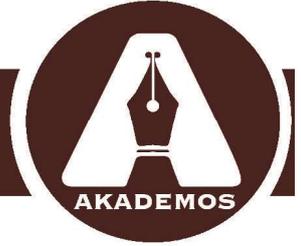
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Abstract

Exploring the realms of suffering of the marginalized ones is the forte of Mahasweta Devi’s writings. Associating her socio-political activism, Devi’s works portray the concept of the gendered subaltern, which implies the extreme subalternation of women based on gender and nationality, caste or class. Many of her influential writings have asserted the perspective of women, alienated from the patriarchal pole. Moreover, she has mainly concentrated on the abject suffering of the tribal women, for whom oppression has become a common fate in the orthodox patriarchal society. What is interesting is that this paper will not only include Devi’s short story “Draupadi”, but also its Manipuri theatrical adaptation by Heisnam Kanhailal of the same name. Apart from the different political and historical context, both of these works resonate a strong resistance and dissent against the frameworks and structures of patriarchy. Both evolve and develop a strong resistance against the current of the dehumanized sufferings. This politics of representation in these two works also could be interpreted as a politics for voice and agency. While discussing Devi’s short story “Draupadi” and Kanhailal’s play *Draupadi*, this paper will also shed light on the transformation of the central character from a distressed and pallid sufferer to a powerful protestor and warrior, and a political one. Analyzing the political backdrops, these hint towards the contemporary social conditions in India and will reflect upon the place and identity of women within the hegemonic domain of patriarchy.

Keywords: women, India, marginalization, suffering, politics, resistance





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The origins of patriarchy came with the advent of agriculture and smallholding, where men realized the need to have control over the production. They defended their acquired resources and exercised their authority over land and labour. As a man got the power, naturally he assumed his authority over the weakest ones - women and children. As a result, the hegemony of the patriarchy emerged and took an obnoxious shape, where a woman became his possession, as is a piece of land. In course of subjugation, women were reduced to a mere object of gratification of carnal desire. Therefore, the history of women is the history of deprivation, depression, suffering and extinction. Literary artists and activists like, Mahasweta Devi or Heisnam Kanhailal did not shy away in representing the unsavoury situations of women, who are subordinated, repressed, commodified and marginalized. Their works are directed against the oppression and the resilience of the victimized central characters. Devi's narratives consist of suffering tales from various underdeveloped regions of native tribes who have no provisions of healthcare system or water. The assistance programs led by the government have failed to bring any advancement in their conditions. Devi's complicated depictions of decolonization, according to Spivak, which articulates postcolonial narratives in “the decolonized terrain” (“Women in Difference” Spivak 105), is a part of an arranged political independence. Not only for the tribal communities and women of West Bengal, but also she fought for such marginalized ones of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. Being a literary and political activist, Devi has campaigned for the betterment in tribal lives, obliteration of bonded labour, implementation of education and other developmental schemes. Devi's short story “Draupadi”, as well as its theatrical version by Kanhailal, both have been highly praised and performed all over India, deals with the sensitive but a major question of the ethics of employing the military forces in dealing with disturbances in civil areas in the country. Many questions have raised along with the instances of rapes committed by army officials in different regions of India, and this is still a debatable issue in the Indian media, political parties as well as in the judicial system.





Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" was written against the backdrop of the wild forests of Southern Bengal at the time of political insurgency in 1971. A messed up time it was in the Indian political scenario. In Bengal, the growing disturbances among the peasants, labourers and tribal communities, got their direction to vent their anger with the Naxalite movement. The seeds of dissent and violence were actually planted deep in the political atmosphere of Bengal. The Naxals declared war, not only against ruling Congress party, but also against the government institutions, legislative system and the property owners and miners. Along with the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Congress party tried to crush the movement by any means. That time was marked by countless allegations of police cruelty, false encounters and lastly, the National Emergency. In addition, the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and the mass genocide done by the military officials evoked anarchy, which deeply affected the Bengal society, literature and art.

Dopdi Mehjen, our 'Draupadi', a young Santhal woman and Naxalite activist, along with her husband Dulna Majhi undertakes guerrilla fighting for the rights of the Santhal people and leads an angry mob against the vicious oppressors who make them bonded slaves, labours and workers. She is like a Robin Hood of the Santhal tribe. Dopdi's band succeeds to kill the relentless landlord in Bakuli, Surya Sahu, who refuses to allow a drop of water at the time of draught. Dopdi in the process incurs the wrath of the State police who seek to deplete the band with fake encounter. However, Dopdi Mejhen faces trouble when two Santhali boys betray and spy on her. She is detected and arrested in the forest and taken to the nearby police station. There the Army Officer, the "Senanayak" orders the constables to torture her to obtain information about the rebels. Dopdi was sexually molested the whole night. She does not know how many have raped her. When she is called by the Senanayak in the morning, she refuses to wear clothes and tear them to pieces. She stands before the astonished Senanayak, totally naked, unarmed, whole body maimed and cut, and her genital matted with blood. Bruised though she is in body but the repeated assaults have strengthened her spirit of revolt. Dopdi's aggressive and reckless reaction is evident when she is detained and ravished:

Draupadi stands up. She pours water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth... Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. ... Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind... Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, do not 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...Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm...She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush to spit a bloody gob at...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" 35-37)

Dopdi achieves a mock victory. Though deprived but not depraved herself, she is destroyed, but not defeated. Like Medusa's laughter, it is the unwavering and unashamed roar of Dopdi, clanging through the reigns of patriarchy. The story of '*vastraharan*' of Draupadi in *Mahabharata* is reconstructed here. Here Mahasweta Devi subverted the narrative as in the epic Draupadi was saved by Lord Krishna, but Dopdi is not rescued. Yet in the face of brutal violence, she courageously refuses to be a victim and defies the humiliation linked with sexual abuse and ravishment, leaving the police officers uneasy and terrified. Gayatri C. Spivak observes, "Dopdi is... What Draupadi – written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power – could not be." Through placing the context of the princess Draupadi in the struggle of Dopdi Mehjen, Mahasweta Devi has presented unuttered and unheard voices and viewpoints of the doubly marginalised ones.

Devi's "Draupadi" through various adaptations has incorporated the rhetoric of nationalism and politics within it. Bringing forth burning issues like violence on women and marginalisation, the character Draupadi becomes the main concern in the theatrical performances across geopolitical spaces and time. The performative representations of this specific role portray the vulnerability and subjugation of Indian women. Now, criticizing the State and its oppressive apparatuses, Heisnam Kanhailal, a famous contemporary theatre director of Manipur, created his own political narrative through a theatrical adaptation of Devi's "Draupadi". The predicament of the marginalized and oppressed ones is highlighted apace with the vulnerability of the Manipuri women. The play was produced in the year 2000 and had a strong impact on the agonized people of Manipur, who were witnessing heinous violence on women by the military officials of their region for a long time. These all started with the establishment of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958. Manipur came into this Act on 1980, as government tried to put a stop against the armed rebellions of that time. Many tribal communities and ethnic groups triggered conflicts and protests not only because of the merging of Manipur as a state with Indian Union, but also of the land distribution, high taxes and inequalities. Government deployed military forces with the power of that lawless law in their hands for a short-term measure of that insurgency. That military power was abused in the names of peace and ending the rebellion. This cruel act "gives the armed forces wide powers to shoot to kill, arrest on flimsy pretext, conduct warrantless searches, and demolish structures in the name of 'aiding civil power.' Equipped with these special powers, soldiers have raped, tortured,



‘disappeared,’ and killed Indian citizens for five decades without fear of being held accountable. The Act violates provisions of international human rights law, including the right to life, the right to be protected from arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. It also denies the victims of the abuses the right to a remedy.” In some of the sections of this Act there is a clear violation of human rights (e.g. in sections 4(a), 4(c) and 6, the rights to life, liberty and security, and remedy are violated). Over more than past fifty years, the ‘conflicted’ areas under AFSPA vary crucially according to their history of conflicts, ethnic faction, and levels of hostility. But all of these regions share the common inhumane experiences of abuse and violence during the imposition of this Act. The military forces eventually became the symbols of hatred and oppression. The Committee for the Repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act states, “Human rights violations have served to fuel conflicts and act as a recruiting sergeant for militant groups in many parts of the country. Arbitrary detention, torture, and the killing of peaceful critics have had the effect of closing democratic and peaceful paths of opposition, forcing organizations underground and fuelling a growth in militancy.” (HRW)

Babloo Loitongbam, the Executive Director of Human Rights Alert, in an interview with HRW says, “Human rights violations by security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations in Manipur have occurred with depressing regularity over the last five decades. Torture, which includes beatings, electric shocks, and simulated drowning, is common. Arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial executions continue. New ‘disappearances’ stopped after the Manipur government introduced a system for providing ‘arrest memos’ but at least 17 people remain missing since they ‘disappeared’ in the 1980s and 1990s” (HRW). The people of Manipur campaigned and protested for a long time for the repeal of this atrocious Act, and also some of them acted desperately like self-sacrificing, stripping naked or fasting until death. Irom Chanu Sharmila’s hunger strike was one of the significant incidents in the course of the protest. In this tumultuous situation, Heisnam Kanhailal comes with his *Draupadi*, based on Mahasweta Devi’s short story and performed in Manipuri. As an adaptation, the story is not deviated from the original one. However, Kanhailal and his theatre group, Kalakshetra Manipur, with the exact realistic representation from the pages, made this play a remarkable one. Always being a political one, Kanhailal, dealing with his theme of power-relations, produced his most talked and most criticized play. Usually he portrays from life around him, and he found Devi’s story a perfect one for the portrayal of the violence of that time. The initial performance of this play in 2000 incited outrage and ferocious criticism among the audiences in Imphal. The particular scene at the end, where Heisnam Sabitri (wife of Kanhailal), who played the role of Dopdi, comes out naked in front of the army chief after repeatedly being gang-raped by the army men, leaves the audiences



stunned and shocked. This play generated a strong effect and induced deep anguish by compelling the audience into witnessing the violence and torture carried out on women over time and space within the country. It was again staged in Delhi and after that, it got critical acclaim, and both Kanhailal and Sabitri were recognized nationally.

However, the main concern lies on not only the theatrical performance, but also the aftermath. An incident later in Manipur questioned if there are any possible connections between the performance and the grim reality. Thangjam Manorama Devi, in 2004, was labelled as a threat by Manipur government for raising voice against AFSPA. She was tortured and arrested, and later repeatedly raped and shot dead by the military armies. An unparalleled and historic protest stirred up following that incident. The protestors all demanded for the repeal of that inhuman Act. L. Gyaneshariⁱ in an interview said that a group of women from the Meitei community of Manipur staged a naked protest in front of the Kangla Fort, where the Assam Rifles had its headquarters, shouting 'Indian Army Rape Us!' They also said, 'We mothers have come. Drink our blood. Eat our flesh. Maybe this way you can spare our daughters'. Many people assumed that there might be a connection between the theatrical performance and the naked protest. However, no direct link was actually found between the performance of *Draupadi*, where nudity stands as a form of protest and the real-life outcry of the naked women as an embodiment of resistance after Manorama Devi's death. Nevertheless, the connections between them through temporal and spatial affinity are not too close to be postulated upon. Still, the play *Draupadi* was strengthened by the naked protest in 2004, and the protest got a putative and performative existence in the media because of its closeness to the play. The relationship remains quite vague and debated, as Kanhailal during an interview with Amar Kanwar told that he received a call at that time which said that 12 Imas [mothers] in Kangla performed his play *Draupadi* that day. The newspapers hailed him as a prophet, and the people as well. Even resemblance was found in the cruel treatment between Manorama and fictional Dopdi. She was arrested from her house without any warrant and remained in the custody. The Assam Rifles denied any bail and labelled her as a 'dangerous threat' by any means. Later, a report revealed that she was gang-raped by the military officials. She was shot to dead, as the officials tried to cover the issues of extra-judicial murder and rape in custody. Even the police secretly cremated her body, without taking any permission from her family members. The Commission of Judicial Enquiry's report noted, "a lady of small stature (4 feet 11 inches), could easily have been prevented from escaping by 13 armed, well-trained, and able-bodied Assam Rifles personnel... I am pained to note that the firings were unnecessary, a valuable life had been made to suffer harshly at the hands of the reckless armed Assam Rifles Persons".



Surabhi Chopra in her article, “Dealing with Dangerous Women: Sexual Assault Under Cover of National Security Laws in India”(2016), wrote:

Manorama Devi was by no means the first person to be extra-judicially executed and tortured by the armed forces. But her killing was so brutal that it triggered extensive public protests in Manipur. (S. Chopra 331)

Chopra identifies that Manorama’s case is a shocking and exceptionally serious example of the inhumane occurrences of women under the roof of national laws, and to an extent in a wider scale of experiences by Indian women. She also points out that these instances show us “women’s vulnerability to unlawful violence under the cover of security laws, and the challenges victims face in seeking redress” (S. Chopra 354).

While discussing in the context of such reiterations of the oppression of women within the nation-building plan, Partha Chatterjee opines:

The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination. As with all hegemonic forms of dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes; the adulation of women as goddess or as a mother. (P. Chatterjee 629 – 630)

Commenting on the intrusion of gendered body politics into the theatrical space, both as a way of representation and its reception rights, Mangai writes, “In a patriarchal system especially, in which the female is ‘othered’, the male gaze devalues or over-values the female body. Devaluation takes the form of demonising women, while over-valuing mystifies, de-sexualises, and places her as out of reach”. While rhetorical concerns have been given due importance in the systemic devaluation and marginalization, the options of women and the trivialization of their rights and concerns were normalized. In this space, the questions of myths and the construction of the concepts of masculinity and femininity assumed a pivotal importance along with the structure of agency and its impact within the social ambit of family and educational institutions. Only by pursuing a consistent and deliberate effort in all the social spaces, one can initiate an attack on the hegemonic patriarchy that lies at the crux of society. The incident in Haryana University in 2016ⁱⁱ can be taken as an instance of how a woman's voices and concerns are allowed to come to the surface under the pretext of nationalism and its rhetoric in the public sphere and yet it asserted the establishment of patriarchal stereotypes only. The academicians and students associated with the theatrical performance of *Draupadi*, were labelled as ‘anti-



nationals' and their play was banned. The student union, along with the ruling political party led an aggressive hate campaign and protest against showing soldiers and police officers in a poor and degradable light. This shows that how with the hyper-nationalistic jingoism, the people are affected by the constant use of the rhetoric of sacrifice of military forces in the propaganda against intellectual freedom. While blindly praising the armed forces, all their former deeds are now validated to the extent that belligerent and hagiographic narratives are restoring the facts, mostly by them who are neither worried nor aware of the facts concerning the cruelties committed by them against women. Therefore, the deletion of 'Draupadi', as a representative of all the women, is another injury inflicted upon, while she carries on with her journey as a marginalized one from *Mahabharata* until now.

Notes:

1. Interview with L Gyaneshori, President, ThangmeibanApunbaNupiLup, Imphal, 26 February 2008, as quoted in Human Rights Watch (2008).

2. On September 21, 2016, *Draupadi*, an adaptation of the translation of Mahasweta Devi's short story by the same name was staged as a play, by the students of the Department of English and Foreign Languages (at the Central University of Haryana) in a function commemorating her recent death. The story itself was already a part of the readings for the students and the play had the full support of the University administration. On September 22, an aggressive hate campaign was organised by the student political union, who mobilised local families of army personnel to protest against showing the soldiers in poor light in the play. The academics and students were accused of 'anti-national' activities. The University gave in to external pressures and distanced themselves from the two teachers responsible for the event, to allow an Intelligence Bureau (India's internal intelligence agency) enquiry against both of them.





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