Reflections of "Draupadi" from *the Mahabharata* to Mahasweta Devi and Manipur

Dr. Munmy Chhetry Baruah
Associate Professor, Department of English, Lala Lajpatrai College, Mumbai-34

Abstract **- The image of Draupadi has inspired generations of writers and readers across cultures and geographies in Pan Indian context. From *the epic Mahabharata* to Mahasweta Devi's and to add further in Manipur Draupadi has shaken the Indian ethos with her unconventional narrative, action and experiments yet, she does not lose her essence and importance. In Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi" is one of the stories from the "breast trilogy" in the *Breast Stories,* that first appeared in *Agnigarbha* (*Womb of Fire*) a collection of loosely connected short political narratives. The story is an audacious and bitter comment on state sponsored violence. Both the story and the character are inspired from myth, but greatly displaced from the original location – unlike Draupadi, the mythological princess and queen of the Pandavas, who has the protection of the male patriarch against the 'vastraharan' this Dopdi, is a subaltern where the state patriarch is instrumental in her 'vastraharan and in dishonouring her.**

Index Terms **- Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi, Resistance and Manipur.**

INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi is one of the most prominent and audacious voices in Bangla Literature who is also probably the most widely translated Indian writer working in a vernacular language. Her writings are mostly based on tribals and tribal life that gives a vivid and accurate description of their world and thoughts. She herself confesses that in the tribal people she has found an endless source of ingredients for writing. Most of her writings deal complexly with the brutal oppression of the Adivasis and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, money lenders and the venal government officials. Her writings are authentic and vivid accounts of the kind of lives tribals live, under constant threat not only of the upper castes/classes but also the state.

Unlike Indira Goswami, who confesses that "she cannot forget her feminine attribute and association, her female identity and gender, though the whole business of writing and its creative process is not gender based or biased" (Quoted in Jain 2007: 85), Mahasweta Devi refuses to be labelled by her gender. She objects to being called a woman writer; in fact, she regards herself not as a feminist but a humanist, an activist.

Speaking about the source of her inspiration she says: *I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations. The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly, noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material else where, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing (http://en.wikipedia .org/wiki/ Mahasweta_Devi).*

"DRAUPADI"

"Draupadi" is only one of the stories from the "breast trilogy" in the *Breast Stories.* "Draupadi" first appeared in *Agnigarbha* (*Womb of Fire*) a collection of loosely connected short political narratives. The story is an audacious and bitter comment on state sponsored violence. Both the story and the character are inspired from myth, but greatly displaced from the original location – unlike Draupadi, the mythological princess and queen of the Pandavas, Dopdi is of an unprivileged class, a tribal naxalite passionately engaged with the naxalite insurgency of the late 1960s. The episode from the epic is recast in Mahasweta's story in which the title character is a tribal guerrilla in the peasant Naxalite uprisings in northern West

Bengal that spread through eastern India in the late 1960s and early 70s**.** Further, unlike her mythological counterpart, Dopdi had only one husband, Dulna Majhi, who too is killed in one of the counter attacks of the army. This story is realised through one key issue – Resistance. Mahasweta transforms the mythological Draupadi into the tribal Dopdi, the agent of a potential unmaking of both gender and class containment. In the 'vastraharan' scene in the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi struggles desperately till the last, trying to clothe and cover herself with the same piece of cloth that is being pulled from her body. She fights hard against being stripped and dishonoured in front of the whole court. Comrade Dopdi, on the other hand, refuses to let her nakedness be a point of dishonour or shame. It is with this unashamed nakedness that the story explodes in a final image of incendiary power.

As the narrative proceeds, "Dopdi Mejhen, aged 27 years, is on a wanted list with the reward of 100 rupees on her head" ("Draupadi", 2002, 19). She is projected as a "most notorious female" (19). The government notices about Dopdi and her comrades in a way proves to be instrumental in understanding Mahasweta's narrative strategy – in an oblique way it reveals that the state-sponsored violence and its negative approach towards the landless and exploited tribals are the root cause of such insurgencies. Those who take to arms to save themselves and their land are branded as either notorious or the most wanted criminals whereas the forces of the state in their uniforms assaulting the unarmed target with sexual violence and multiple rapes are called soldiers on duty.

Dopdi Mejhan cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name "Draupadi". Devi makes the most astonishing point that a tribal female who is unable to pronounce her own sanskritised name, "pronounces" such an innovative and profound resistance against armed men despite being a vulnerable and unarmed target. She shows her ultimate strength notwithstanding her illiteracy and gender. She does what the epic Draupadi could not. Mahasweta seems to hint that the marginal and the downtrodden have been always underestimated and treated unfairly.

MYTH TO REALITY

While the mythical Draupadi has five husbands, each one with his own unique power, Dopdi has only one husband and her comrades-in-arms. At the very beginning of the story itself, they are all either dead or injured; and what Dopdi is left with is only her own courage and will. This marks a radical shift from the original Draupadi of myth to the modern one. In Spivak's words we can say that the story "traces the refraction, even distortion that a dominant Hindu myth suffers when displaced into a non-Hindu subaltern space and filtered through a subaltern consciousness" (Spivak, 1987). Dopdi too has five 'Pandavas' but conjugally she belongs only to one – the deceased Dulna Majhi – while the rest are all her fellow insurgents bound together in a cause.

When the story begins, Shomai and Budhana have betrayed the cause and their own comrades, Shomra is on the run, Golok has gone underground in Bakuli, while Dulna has been killed in a "police encounter", hunted down like an animal by the Special Forces mobilized against the Naxalites. Dopdi is alone but still perfectly capable of fighting against the tremendous forces of the state. Though she is apprehended, stripped and multiply raped by police personnel, at the end it is the Chief of the Police, Senanayak, who feels helpless before her strength and her resistance.

When the story begins, Dopdi is on the run from the forces of the repressive state after having lost her male comrades to violent deaths. Finally, when she is caught and "apprehended", her punishment is not the kind her other male comrades might have suffered. It is a gender specific punishment – multiple rape. But what allows her to transcend her status of a victim, is her refusal to cover herself with her "cloth" after her rape. The effectiveness of Dopdi's resistance lies in her refusal to act predictably. She is, thus, reframing the paradigm of the action itself.

FROM VICTIMHOOD TO RESISTANCE

The story ends with Dopdi walking towards Senanayak flaunting her ravaged and naked body, "her head held high" (36-37). Faced with this woman, whose audacity Senanayak is unable to negotiate, he becomes the silenced subject. With the boundaries between the Self and the Other completely breached,

for the first time he knows an irrational fear. Power itself is questioned when Dopdi says "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" What makes the story so complex is the fact that Dopdi's resistance comes from within the situation which binds her.

Mahasweta's Dopdi does what the mythological Draupadi could not. In the absence of a patriarch who could possibly save her from being dishonoured in a miraculous way, she disrobes herself. The victim of multiple rape, at the end she confronts her apprehender Senanayak with a naked body. By refusing to cover herself after she is raped, Dopdi actually negates Senanayak's brutal attempt to control and dominate her. Symbolically it reverses the very power relationship which decrees the man as the subject and woman, his object. Dopdi taunts Senanayak in the following words:

Whats the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?
Are you a man?... There is not a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me –, counter me –? Dopdi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (36-37).

"DRAUPADI" FROM MAHABHARAT, MAHASWETA DEVI TO MANIPUR

The episode from the *Mahabharata* may have inspired many an artistic representation, but Mahasweta's self-assertive Dopdi has inspired some modern-day grassroots revolutions in parts of postcolonial India. In March/April of 2005, the national dailies and the mainstream media created ripples with some of the most haunting images of women's defiance of the might of New Delhi and the state. They were photographs of a group of middle-aged Manipuri women standing stark-naked in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal, in protest. Significantly, the women in the pictures stand with their backs to the hugely ornate gates of the army installation, facing the camera instead and screaming "Come rape us!" This was nakedness being waved like a gun right in the face of New Delhi. All the intellectual circles of Imphal, Kolkata and the New-Delhi knew very well the provocation behind this unique enactment of protest – a long day's curfew followed by Chitranjan Das's self-immolation following Manorama Devi's suspicious death in trouble-torn Imphal. No doubt it was the strong political provocation which inspired those women to take to stripping as a form of public protest. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" inspired the women from Manipur to parade naked and counter the armed forces and its brutal and fundamentally gendered reprisals. It was during the troubled and bloody years (roughly 2004-05) of army atrocities in the North Eastern states that Heshnam Kanhailal, a Manipuri theatre director of national repute, had presented a stage adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", and it was through this staging that Mahasweta's story entered the common imagination of the people and inspired a revolution in the violence hit state of Manipur.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Mahasweta's story does not offer any resolutions or closures; and by that Mahasweta carries Dopdi's resistance beyond the text to feed it into a larger discourse of resistance – by problematising, questioning and rearticulating gender relations, by exploring different modes of resistance and by locating possible areas of resistance and agency within structures. In conclusion it can be said though Dopdi's violation begins with her gendered body, yet this very body emerges as her vital source of resistance.

REFERENCE

[1] Beck, Tony and Tirthankar Bose. 1999. "Dispossession, Degradation and Empowerment of Peasantry and the Poor in Bengali Fiction". *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 30, No. 9.
[2] Borgohain, Pradipta. 2004. "Insurgency and Women Writers of Assam." In Malashri Lal, Shormistha and Sumanyu Panja and Satpathy (eds.) *Signifying the Self: Women and Literature*. New-Delhi: Macmillan.
[3] Calman, Leslie J. 1985. *Protest in Democratic India*. Boulder: Westview Press.

[4] Devi, Mahasweta. 2002. "Draupadi". *Breast Stories.* Transl. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
[5] Dunka M. Mohr (ed.). 2008. "Introduction". *Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English,* Cross/Cultures 95, Asnel Papers 11, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
[6] Dworkin, Andrea. 1998. *Intercourse.* London: Arrow Books.
[7] Goswami, Phul. 2001. "Upanta-upakul" ("The Final Shore"). *Sahajatri aru Ananya.* Guwahati: Anwesha.
[8] Ghosh, Shoba V. 1996. "Refiguring Myth: Draupadi and Three Indian Writers", *New Quest,* February-March.
[9] Hindwan, Sudhir. 1997. "Combating Terrorism: Lessons From around the world". *Peace Initiatives* Vol. 3 No. 3, May-June. Available at http://www.cwru.edu/affil/sce/Texts_2002/Banerjee&Liles.html
[10] Jain, Jasbir (ed.). 2007. *Growing up as a Woman Writer.* New Delhi: Sahitya Academy.
[11] Mohanty, Manoranjan. 1977. *Revolutionary Violence: A Study of the Maoist Movement in India*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
[12] Pickering, Jean and Suzanne Kehde. 1998. "Reading de Certeau through Mahasweta Devi: And vice versa". *Narrative* Vol 6 No 3.
[13] Roy, Anuradha. 1999. "Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah". In *Patterns of Feminist Conciousness in Indian Women Writers.* New-Delhi: Prestige Books.
[14] Shahani, Roshan G. and Shoba V. Ghosh. 2000. "Indian Feminist Criticism: In search of New Paradigms". *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 35 No. 43/44.
[15] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1981. "Draupadi" by Mahasveta Devi. *Critical Inquiry* Vol.8 No. 2, Writing and Sexual Difference.
[16] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1987. *In other World: Essays in Cultural Politics.* New York: Methuen.
[17] Wenzel, Jennifer. 1998. "Epic Struggles over India's Forests in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction". *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 18, Postcolonial Discourse in South Asia.