

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*: A Discourse of Dispossessed

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Mahasweta Devi is acclaimed by both local (Bengali Language) and national reading publics who have access to her work through translation. This access has made her a household name over virtually the entire subcontinent. She is one of those rare writers who always aspire to find and explore something challenging and new and never accept the existing ideals. As a creative writer, her contribution is important, both in significance and in volume.

In the spring of 1967, there was a successful peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal. This peculiar coalition of peasant and intellectual sparked off a number of Naxalbaris all over India. The target of these movements was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law. Indeed, one might say that legislation seemed to have an eye to its own future circumvention. It is worth remarking that this coalition of peasant and intellectual-with long histories of apprenticeship precisely on the side of the intellectual-has been recuperated in the West by both ends of the polarity that constitutes a 'political spectrum.' The target of these movements was the long established oppression of the landless peasantry and farm workers sustained through an unofficial government- landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law. In 1970, the implicit hostility between East and West Pakistan flamed into armed struggle. If a guerrilla style insurgency had persisted, there forces would undoubtedly have come to dominate the politics of the movement. It was this trend that the Indian authorities were determined to pre-empt by intervention. Taking advantage of the general atmosphere of jubilation at the defeat of West Pakistan, India's principal national rival in South Asia, The Indian Prime Minister was able to crack down with exceptional severity on the Naxalites destroying the rebellious sections of the rural population, most significantly the tribals.

This is the setting of *Draupadi*. 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. In order to grasp the minutiae of their relationship and involvement, one must enter a historical micrology that no foreword can provide. '*Draupadi*' the name takes us in long back in a hall, where the enemy chief begins to pull at her sari. Draupadi silently prays to the incarnate Krishna. The idea of sustaining law (dharma) materializes itself as clothing and as the king pulls at her sari, there seems to be more and more of it. She is infinitely clothed and can not be publicity stripped. It is one of Krishna's miracles. But Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, gang- raped by police, refuses to be clothed by men again. In *Draupadi*, what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence beings to blur.

On the level of the text, this elusive and fortuitous name does play a role. To speculate upon this role, we have to consider the *Mahabharata* itself. The *Mahabharata* contains instances of various kinds of kinship structure and various styles of marriage. It is Draupadi who provides the only example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India. She is married to the five sons of the impotent Pandu. Within the Patriarchal and Patronymic Context she is exceptional indeed singular in the sense of odd unpaired uncoupled. Her husbands since they are husbands rather than lovers are 'Legitimately pluralized'. No acknowledgment of paternity can secure the name of the father for the child of such a mother. Draupadi questions this by placing Dopdi first in a comradely activist's monogamous marriage and then in a situations of multiple rape.

Dopdi Mejhien, twenty seven year old is on the list of wanted. Long back Dopdi's mother threshed rice at Surja Sahu's at Bakuli. It was Surja Sahu's wife who gave her name Draupadi. Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests rotating between Birbhhum, Burdwan and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous operation

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Bakuli, when three villages were cordoned off and gunned down, they too lay on the ground, faking deed. In fact they were the main culprits. In all this they were the chief instigators. Dulna and Dopdi went underground for a long time. The Special Forces attempted to find them out. Therefore they are on the list of wanted.

Guerilla Warfare is supposed to be the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting with primitive weapons. Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such war is the sacred duty of every soldier. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of such fighters, for they too killed with hatchets and scythes, bows and arrows. Mr. Senanayak, who is sent to catch Dulna and Dopdi, is not to be trifled with. Whatever his 'practice' in 'theory' he respects the opposition.

In fact, he knows that, as in the old popular song, turn by turn the world will change. And in every world he must have the credentials to survive with honour. If necessary he will show the future to what extent he alone understands the matter in its proper perspective. He knows very well that what he is doing today the future will forget, but he also knows that if he can change colour from world to world, he can represent the particular world in question. Today he is getting rid of the young by means of 'apprehension and elimination', but he knows people will soon forget the memory and the lessons of blood. (Breast Stories 23)

After escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner; they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers. Finally the impenetrable forest of Jharkhani is surrounded by real soldiers, the army enters and splits the battlefield. Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water. On one such search, army informant Dukhram Gharai sees a young *santhal* man lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. The soldiers shoot him as he lays drinking water. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Majhi. Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood. No doubt it is she who is saving the fugitives now. But the search for Dopdi continues. In the forest belt of Jharkhani, the 'operation' continuous- will continue. Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture.

If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They kountered him. When they kounter you your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed; your sex is a terrible wound. Killed by police in an encounter... unknown male... age twenty- two. (Breast Stories 28)

Dopdi and Dulna would work around the Jharkhani belt. Dulna had explained to Dopdi "Dear this is best! We won't get family and children this way. But who knows? Landowner and moneylender and policeman might one day be wiped out!" (Breast Stories 30)

But Draupadi Mejhen got apprehended. She was sent to 'camp'. She was interrogated for about an hour, but no one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8.57 Senanayak's diner hour approached, and he disappeared saying, "Make her do the needful." (Breast Stories 34)

Then a billion moons pass. It seems a billion lunar years have passed. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. She tries to move, but feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. She is incredibly thirsty. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. She thinks, "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, she is made up right. Again she thinks, "How many? Four- five- six- seven- then Draupadi had passed out." (Breast Stories 35)

The story of Dopdi reminds one of Draupadi in *Mahabharata*. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi. It is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. The punishment seems unending. Dopdi when turns her eyes, she sees her white cloth.

Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her for the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of

making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it. (Breast Stories 35)

Senanayak pushed Dopdi properly in night but he himself is in trouble the next day as Dopdi remains publicly naked at her own insistence. There is a commotion as if the alarm has 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 follow behind. Draupadi stands before him, naked. She laughs and says, "The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhhen you asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Breast Stories 36) Senanayak barks, "What is this? Where are her clothes?" (Breast Stories 36) Draupadi laughs; her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. She wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting. "What's the use of cloths? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Breast Stories 36) She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, "There is not 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 *kounter* me- come on *kounter* me-?" (Breast Stories 37) Draupadi pushed Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is terrified to stand in front of an unarmed 'target'. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.

On the level of the plot, Senanayak is the army officer who captures and degrades Draupadi. In practice, the instruments of First-World life and investigation are complicit with such captures and such a degradation. Author's careful presentation of Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete can be noticed. In *theory*, Senanayak can identify with the enemy. Thus his emotions at Dopdi's capture are mixed: sorrow (theory) and joy (practice).

As a tribal, Dopdi is not romanticized by Mahasweta. Dopdi is not like Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. There is nothing 'historically implausible' about Dopdi's attitudes. She loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith toward him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their woman's honour. She crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman. She emerges as the most powerful 'subject' who, still using the language of sexual 'honour', can derisively call herself "the object of your search" (Breast Stories 36) whom the author can described as a terrifying superobject- "an unarmed *target*?" (Breast Stories 37) Of course, this voice of male authority also fades. Once Dopdi enters, in the final section of the story, the postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference, she is in a place where she will finally act *for* herself in *not* 'acting,' in challenging the man to (en) counter her as unrecorded or misrecorded objective historical monument. The army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, "What is this?" (Breast Stories 36) In fact, in the sentence describing Dopdi's final summons to the *sahib's* tent, the agent is missing. An allegory of the woman's struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment can be seen.

Works Cited:

Spivak, Chakravorty Gayatri. *Breast Stories*. Kolkata: Seagull 2002.