

A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* as a Critique of Power Centers

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Abstract: *Mahasweta Devi, renowned Bengali writer and a human rights activist, whose works addressed the existential dilemmas of tribal society. Her interest in journalism motivated her to advocate the rights of less privileged population who are often crushed under the wheels of power. In the course of time, she started an organization that voiced out the concerns of oppressed. Her works are noted for its originality. The boundary line between reality and fiction is narrow or often absent in her works. Her interest in tribal life is fully surfaced in the short story Draupadi. The work celebrates the indomitable willpower of the central character inspite of her tragic fate. Her story never fails to criticize the agencies of power that make the life of indigenous people a difficult one*

Keywords: *power, gender, discrimination, Draupadi. superiority and inferiority.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

A study in to human history makes its clear the role of power dichotomies in endangering the dreams of a particular section of society. Gender, class and caste based discriminations stem from the division, which is made by manipulating the cultural values. Agencies of power further circulates prejudices of superiority and inferiority in order to justify the cause of subjugation. Lack of accessibility and anonymity surrounding tribal life and culture must be one of the reasons of its subordinated position.in this context it is to be noted that, when discriminations go beyond limits, people derive strength to challenge and attack power structures. Literally it happens in the short story *Draupadi*. Land lords, Money lenders and Police Force are presented as centers of power.

2. DRAUPADI :

A study around *Draupadi* should start from the central character *Draupadi* or *Dopdi Mehjen*. Her name demands a special attention as it takes the readers to the epic *Mahabharata*. There is a particular episode from *Mahabharata* that depicts an assault towards *Draupadi* by *Dushasana*. As she is disrobed and insulted in public, Lord Krishna appears and saves her from further assault. Similar situation is there in the short story, but *Dopdi*, the tribal lady is left alone to face the violent sexual assault that goes beyond comparisons. A close analysis of the situation makes one understand that her 'gender' and 'class identity' made her a victim of sexual assault by brute force.

The story is set in Bengal of 1970's. The 'look out notice' introduced at the onset carries the essential details of *Draupadi*. An amount of one hundred rupees is offered as reward for assistance. *Dopdi* and her husband *Dulna Majhi* are agricultural labourers and are accused of murdering *Surja Sahu* (land lord of *Bakuli*) and his son along with other tribals (*Spivak 392*). *Surja Sahu* is assumed to be a ruthless and exploitative landlord, who levied a good amount of tax from workers. The workers are also forced to pay an additional tax for water during drought season. That action put their lives in distress and triggered people to launch a struggle against the land lord (*Spivak 398*). *Dopdi* and *Dulna* received enough support for their efforts. The act of murder can be considered as a blow to the system that nurtures the land owners and marginalise poor people.

Right to equality is guaranteed in Indian Constitution to all its citizens irrespective of class, caste and gender. But then discrimination prevails in various forms and indigenous people become victims of such practices. The statement from the work testifies their lack of representation in official records:

First Livery: What is this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I bought has nothing like it!
How can anyone have an unlisted name? (Spivak 392)

The statement points out the inability of the system, that fails to have a connection with tribals, their language and culture. It is as if they are no longer treated as part of the nation. Mahasweta Devi wants the system to reform itself so as to accommodate tribes and is also expected to ensure the rights and rightful place to the indigenous people.

The death of Surja Sahu and his son made the system aware of the potential threats, that they are about to encounter. Police force under the leadership of Captain Arjun Singh is soon sent to the place to hunt down the culprits. The operation came to be known as 'Operation Forest Jharkhani'. They identified Dulna and Dopdi as the 'chief instigators' and focussed their attention on them. But Dopdi and Dulna escaped from the scene by faking death (Spivak 392). Their skill in self-concealment and the inability of the force to distinguish them from Austro-Asian Munda tribes made it a difficult task to police who went in search of them. Meanwhile a delay in capture accelerated captain's pulse rate. The system then deployed 'Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat to assist the force. He empowered the force with knowledge about the tribes especially their attacking style, guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons (Spivak 393). Senanayak is a grey shaded character, who speaks in favour of police and system but then he understands and supports the ideology of the oppressed. He believes that the world will recognise the reality sooner or later. He reveals that his only concern is to live honourably in every regime. The account of Dulna's death is then mentioned in the narrative. Force used Dulna's corpse as bait and waited for Dopdi's turn but the attempt was a failure (Spivak 394).

A shocking piece of information regarding the police encounter is given in the text:

By the law of confrontation, they are shot at the tax payers expense, by the law of confrontation their eyeballs, intestines, stomachs, hearts, genitals, and so on become the food of fox, vulture, hyena, wild cat, ants and worm and the untouchables go off happily to sell their bare skeletons (Spivak 395).

The given description reveals the consequences of an encounter. The sad fate of fugitives upsets the mind of every reader. Even a chance of decent burial is denied and no one can provide a justification for the act.

Right to information is considered as important as fundamental rights, ensured by the constitution. After every encounter the authority is expected to brief the incidents that happened. The process is relevant because it brings in 'transparency' to the system. The 'press meet session' presented in the story became a pointless one after the questions are left unanswered by the respective authority:

How many went originally?

The answer is silence?

How many killed in six years confrontation?

The answer is silence

Why after confrontations are the skeletons discovered with arms broken or severed? Could armless men have fought? Why do the collar bones shake? Why are legs and ribs crushed?

Two kinds of answer. Silence (Spivak 396).

'Silence' of the authority can be interpreted as the unaccountability of the system towards the public which inevitably becomes a threat to democratic system. Considering all these, writer can be seen side-lining with fugitives. Villages too remain sympathetic to fugitives (Spivak 396). In the course of the narrative, it is reported that Shomai and Bodhna (members of Santhal community) worked as spies and betrayed fugitives for money. Whereas, Dopdi is well determined and nothing deterred her from achieving the life goals that she along with Dulna set together for the wellbeing of their community. "Dulna had explained to Dopdi, Dear, this is the best! We won't get family and children this way. But who knows? Land owner and money lender and police man might one day be wiped out!" (Spivak 399).

Dopdi and Dulna gave up their happiness and togetherness for a common cause. Dulna is no more and Dopdi is ready to face the police but she is not willing to compromise the security of other fugitives. In that way, she assumes the role of a leader, who is fearless and can guide others to rightful destination. Her surrender to police stands out as a heroic one. Dopdi's knowledge of what is about to happen in camp didn't drain away her confidence. The sexual violence she encountered at the camp went beyond descriptions. Yet like a fighter she roared at the officer, who ordered the assault. "Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid." (Spivak 402).

3. CONCLUSION:

Mahasweta Devi was able to touch each and every aspect of tribal life in her work *Draupadi*. The characters of Dripdi and Dulna stay in mind even after the story is being read. It's never a fictional work, at times it merges with disturbing realities around tribal lives. The work calls for a reformation of the system that closes its doors to indigenous people. The central idea of the work is that irrespective of class, caste and gender human beings deserve a life that is free from injustice and discrimination.

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