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## The Politics of the Body in Mahasweta Devi's Short Story "Draupadi"

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### **Abstract:**

The present article seeks to examine the retelling of the *Mahabharata* by Mahasweta Devi in her story "Draupadi" from the feminist and postcolonial point of view. The attempt is to discern the points of interaction between the body and the body-politic as it emerges in the story with a particular view to unearth the mechanism by which patriarchy uses the body of the woman to perpetuate its power and sense of superiority. A brief examination of the relevant sections of the epic helps to locate Devi's story in the contemporary context of the Naxalite revolution wherein the woman's body gets doubly marginalized on account of her identity as a woman and as an underground political revolutionary.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Draupadi, patriarchy, body, shame.

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" offers a very radical and interesting rereading of the epic *Mahabharata* with a particular focus on the scene of Draupadi's disrobing which is subjected to a drastic revision. The name of Draupadi evokes several and very often mixed and contradictory responses and emotions in our minds. Her character itself is associated with several controversies in the cultural memory of our race and the most lasting image that lingers in the minds of people, irrespective of whether they have read the epic or not, is the disrobing scene during the gambling match that takes place between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. A little knowledge of the *Mahabharata* seems to have become a part of our collective memory. The epic battle, the gambling match, the disrobing scene, the trial of arms between the Kaurava and the Pandava princes, the discus formation leading to the death of Abhimanyu, the crisis of Arjuna in the battlefield followed by Krishna's message of the Geeta are all high points of the *Mahabharata*. The genre of an epic, is by nature such that it encompasses themes and issues that are primarily of a patriarchal nature. Themes of war, kinship, governance, administration, law and legality, inheritance are all male-centered which involve very negligible or no female agency. Women's involvement is limited only to marginal or indirect participation that is never of a decisive nature. Yet the most ironical thing about the *Mahabharata* is that very often the woman, i.e. Draupadi is considered to be responsible for the war and its aftermath. This impression is however quite misplaced since despite being depicted as a strong and vocal personality, Draupadi lacks true agency. She has to depend upon the men to exact revenge

against the Kauravas who had humiliated her in the assembly hall. Her strong power of articulation fails to translate into actual power when it comes to negotiating with the Kauravas for justice.

Indian feminists have often appropriated the figure of Draupadi to revise and re-tell the epic narrative. The radical potential inherent in her character is subjected to multiple interpretations that go a long way in revising the epic. Devi's story "Draupadi" is one such example where the character of Draupadi and the scene of disrobing are radically revised and the epic story is given a rather shocking twist. A serious and a critical assessment of the short story with a special focus on the politics of the woman's body is the subject of the present article. Prior to the consideration of the story itself, it would be pragmatic to recapitulate the main points of the epic narrative with a particular reference to the episode of the dice-match and the subsequent disrobing of Draupadi.

The character of Draupadi has several unconventionalities associated with her such as her birth which is of an unusual nature, born as she is out of a sacrificial fire; her marriage which is of a polyandrous nature; her disrobing in the assembly hall of the Kauravas; her abduction by Jayadratha and her special relationship with Krishna. However, the event that is popularly singled out as the high point of the epic in general and of Draupadi's life in particular is the scene of disrobing which is interpreted as the greatest insult to her and to the collective honour of the Pandavas. Though the scene is well known and widely represented in popular culture, yet a brief recapitulation will do well. The Kaurava prince Duryodhana is jealous after his visit to the magnificent palace of the Pandavas in Indraprastha which is built by the demon Maya. Seeing the most magical of palaces, he comes back to Hastinapur and conspires to invite the Pandavas to a game of dice in which he would defeat them with the help of his uncle Shakuni who is very skillful in the game. Duryodhana's intention is to rob the Pandavas of their wealth and thereby to subject them to humiliation and defeat. Unaware of Duryodhana's malicious intentions, Yudhishtira accepts the invitation and arrives at Hastinapur along with his brothers and Draupadi. As the match begins, the Pandavas keep losing with every throw of the dice and they begin to lose their wealth and property. Everything is staked and lost with the progress of the match and finally it comes to their personal selves which so are staked and lost. As there remains nothing else to stake, Shakuni suggests that Draupadi is still left and therefore she so should be staked:

Vaisampayana continued,--Having said this, Sakuni, well-skilled at dice, spoke unto all the brave kings present there of his having won, one after another, all the Pandavas. The son of Suvala then, addressing Yudhishtira said,--'O king, there is still one stake dear to thee that is still unwon. Stake thou Krishna, the princess of Panchala. By her, win thyself back.' (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXIV, Vol 2: 125)is

Acquiescing to the proposal, Yudhishtira sends for Draupadi who was in the inner chambers on account of her menstruation and was clad in a single piece of garment. Caught unawares by the arrival of a messenger bearing Yudhishtira's message of appearing in the assembly-hall, Draupadi expresses her doubt and the following conversation takes place between her and the messenger (*Pratikami*):

Draupadi said,--'Why, O *Pratikamin*, dost thou say so? What prince is there who playeth staking his wife? The king was certainly intoxicated with dice. Else, could he not find any other object to stake?'

The Pratikamin said,--'When he had nothing else to stake, it was then that Ajatasatru, the son of Pandu, staked thee. The king had first staked his brothers, then himself, and then thee, O princess.'

Draupadi said,--'O son of the *Suta* race, go, and ask that gambler present in the assembly, whom he hath lost first, himself, or me. Ascertaining this, come hither, and then take me with thee, O son of the *Suta* race.' (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2:126)

As the messenger returns to the hall with Draupadi's question, he is sent back again to bring her. Yudhishtira himself commands him to seek her though he very well knows that "she was attired in one piece of cloth with her navel itself exposed, in consequence of her season having come" (*Mhb*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 128). Fearing the wrath of Draupadi, the messenger wavers to go. Seeing him fluctuate, Duryodhana orders his brother Duhshashana to bring her forcibly into the assembly. He says, "therefore, go thou thyself and forcibly bring hither the daughter of Yajnasena" (*Mhb*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 127). Thus directed, he rushes to bring Draupadi by force. The following description of the forceful dragging of Draupadi is very poignant in its evocation of the violence that is perpetrated on the body of the woman:

And Dussasana dragging Krishna of long long locks unto the presence of the assembly--as if she were helpless though having powerful protectors--and pulling at her, made her tremble like the banana plant in a storm. And dragged by him, with body bent, she faintly cried--'Wretch! it ill behoveth thee to take me before the assembly. My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire. (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 128).

This scene portrays the ultimate patriarchal violence that is perpetrated on the body of the woman. Draupadi's body becomes the site of showcasing male prowess, be it the Kauravas or the Pandavas. Appropriation of the woman's body becomes a patriarchal tug of war that triggers a chain of events in which Draupadi, despite having no agency, gets ironically caught. The cycle of revenge that is unleashed following the staking of Draupadi goes a long way in

writing the history of the Kuru race.

The patriarchal injunction against the public appearance of a menstruating woman gets violated in the case of Draupadi when she is forcefully brought into the hall. On appearing in the assembly hall, Draupadi addresses all the Kuru elders and says:

Thou draggest me who am in my season before these Kuru heroes. This is truly an unworthy act. But no one here rebuketh thee. Assuredly, all these are of the same mind with thee. O fie! Truly hath the virtue of the Bharata gone! Truly also hath the usage of those acquainted with the Kshatriya practice disappeared! Else these Kurus in this assembly would never have looked silently on this act that transgresseth the limits of their practices. Oh! both Drona and Bhishma have lost their energy, and so also hath the high-souled Kshatta, and so also this king. Else, why do these foremost of the Kuru elders look silently on this great crime?" (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 128)

No one however has any answer to the question posed by Draupadi. Breaking the looming silence, Bhishma says:

O blessed one, morality is subtle. I therefore am unable to duly decide this point that thou hast put, beholding that on the one hand one that hath no wealth cannot stake the wealth belonging to others, while on the other hand wives are always under the orders and at the disposal of their lords. Yudhishtira can abandon the whole world full of wealth, but he will never sacrifice morality. The son of Pandu hath said--'I am won.' Therefore, I am unable to decide this matter. Sakuni hath not his equal among men at dice-play. The son of Kunti still voluntarily staked with him. The illustrious Yudhishtira doth not himself regard that Sakuni hath played with him deceitfully. Therefore, I cannot decide this point." (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 129)

Draupadi poses an important point of legality and her question challenges the male body of knowledge. She asks:

The king was summoned to this assembly and though possessing no skill at dice, he was made to play with skilful, wicked, deceitful and desperate gamblers. How can he be said then to have staked voluntarily? The chief of the Pandavas was deprived of his senses by wretches of deceitful conduct and unholy instincts, acting together, and then vanquished. He could not understand their tricks, but he hath now done so. Here, in this assembly, there are Kurus who are the lords of both their sons and their daughters-in-law! Let all of them, reflecting well upon

my words, duly decide the point that I have put. (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 130)

Draupadi's question finds no answer. Vikarna, a brother of Duryodhana, however does speak out against the unjust treatment meted out to Draupadi. Karna adds to her humiliation by publicly denouncing her as an unchaste woman who deserves to be disrobed. He brings the logic of polyandry to justify his allegation:

O son of the Kuru race, the gods have ordained only one husband for one woman. This Draupadi, however, hath many husbands. Therefore, certain it is that she is an unchaste woman. To bring her, therefore, into this assembly attired though she be in one piece of cloth--even to uncover her is not at all an act that may cause surprise. (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 131)

As Duhshashana pulls off her robe, Draupadi seeks refuge in her friend and lord Krishna, and her honour is ultimately saved with divine intervention:

And while Yajnaseni was crying aloud to Krishna, also called Vishnu and Hari and Nara for protection, the illustrious Dharma, remaining unseen, covered her with excellent clothes of many hues. And, O monarch as the attire of Draupadi was being dragged, after one was taken off, another of the same kind, appeared covering her. And thus did it continue till many clothes were seen. And, O exalted one, owing to the protection of Dharma, hundreds upon hundreds of robes of many hues came off Draupadi's person. And there arose then a deep uproar of many many voices. And the kings present in that assembly beholding that most extraordinary of all sights in the world, began to applaud Draupadi and censure the son of Dhritarashtra. (*Mbh*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2: 132)

This epic scene of Krishna saving Draupadi from the ultimate humiliation is very often evoked as the reward that is available to a "chaste" woman for her virtue.

Devi revisits this episode of Draupadi's disrobing and turns it completely around. The protagonist of her short story is a woman who is very consciously named Draupadi Mejhen but unlike her epic namesake hers is a monogamous marriage and she belongs to the Santhal tribe. She has none of the luxuries that royalty offers. Instead she is on the run as the police is seeking her for her involvement in the Naxalite activities. Her husband, Dulna Mejhen has already been encountered and killed and Draupadi or Dopdi, as she is referred to in the story, is trying to evade arrest. However, she is unable to avoid it and is ultimately apprehended by the police. What happens after her arrest is nerve racking and it upsets the epic paradigm. Whereas Draupadi was disrobed but was rescued from the ultimate humiliation of being stripped naked by

the intervention of Krishna, Devi's protagonist is gang raped at the behest of the "Senanayak" who is the head of the forces. His order to "Make her" is an euphemism for rape and on the morning after the atrocity, Dopdi is asked to appear before the Senanayak. Using her raped and mutilated body as her weapon, she refuses to be clothed and appears before him stark naked. This action of hers throws the entire system, both patriarchal and political, out of gear and she throws back the semiotics of shame on the perpetrators of crime.

Devi's story can be read and understood within the theoretical framework outlined by the radical French feminists (such as Hélène Cixous). Feminists like Cixous exhort women to make their bodies a medium of their speech and writing. The woman's body gets appropriated for a function other than sexual in the short story and this constitutes a challenge to the patriarchal hegemony. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi can be identified as a hysteric—as defined and glorified by Cixous. The following quotation from Cixous's essay titled "Castration or Decapitation" is relevant in this context:

Always keep in mind the distinction between speaking and talking. It is said, in philosophical texts, that women's weapon is the word, because they talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don't actually speak, they have nothing to say. They always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge. Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body. In the end, the woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance.ii

Draupadi can be described as that "disturbance" which has been described by Helene Cixous in this essay. Her hysteria relates to the acquirement of a new language which is the language of the body. The political state and the patriarchal set-up fails to make sense of the woman once she steps out of the phallogocentric symbolic system and speaks in a new language.

Devi's Dopdi suffers the implied act of rape which underlies the episode of disrobing in the epic. After being apprehended by the Special Forces, who had been on a look out for her, the Senanayak issues orders to — "Make her" (Devi 34) which actually translates as

— "Rape her". She is gang-raped through the entire night. Her mangled breasts, torn nipples and bleeding vagina stand witness to the brutality of the act that is perpetrated on her body as the narrator describes:

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. (Devi 35)

Dopdi is asked to appear before the Senanayak in the morning after the ordeal and she is provided with a pot of water to clean and bathe herself. She, however, refuses to wash herself and instead tears her cloth with her teeth. Her unusual behaviour makes the guard confused and he calls her “crazy” (Devi 36). He rushes to call the Senanayak who is shocked to see the naked and mangled body of Draupadi.

She uses her battered body as her ultimate weapon against her tormentors. Dopdi’s act of resistance lies in emptying her nakedness of its erotic content and the socially assigned feeling of shame. Shame is often associated with the woman’s body in most cultures. The socio-cultural stereotyping of women has led to the gendering of shame as a result of which women “ought” to feel shame on being subjected to the male gaze. This paradigm gets reversed in Devi’s story where, unlike in the *Mahabharata*, the woman does not appeal to a male guardian for safety but turns the tables against the male onlookers by reversing the semiotics of shame. Attacking her tormentors with the sting of her fierce language she says:

“There isn’t 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—?”  
(Devi 36-37)

The male gaze turns women into a spectacle as in the case of Draupadi in the epic. Laura Mulvey’s theory about the male gaze which turns women into objects of spectacle is extremely relevant in this context. Mulvey is a British feminist film theorist. She is best known for her essay “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” which is considered to be one of the core texts of feminist film theory. She uses the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud and Jaques Lacan to critique Hollywood cinema. According to her, women occupy the position of the looked-at object and men enjoy the status of the onlooker within any act of representation. Mulvey’s observation in the context of the cinema can be applied to any act of gazing. She says:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.iii

The stereotype of the male gaze and female shame stand reversed in the final act of Dopdi. She forces the male spectators to feel ashamed and she cancels her own “looked-at-ness” by standing unabashed in her nakedness. This constitutes the point of divergence from the epic where Draupadi had resorted to help from Krishna in order to protect her honour. The tribal, illiterate



protagonist of Devi's story does not enjoy any such privilege. In her foreword to the English translation of the story, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says:

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi—in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.<sup>iv</sup>

Women's bodies get intertwined with the body politic both in this story and in the epic. Whereas in the epic Draupadi's body is the site upon which patriarchy enacts its transfer of power, in the short story the woman's body becomes both the site on which the body politic exhibits its power and the weapon with which the woman fights against political and patriarchal oppression. Whereas the epic Draupadi was forced to feel ashamed in the assembly hall on account of her disrobing at the hands of Duhshashana, Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi turns the dishonor and shame that is directed at the body of the woman on to the representatives of the body-politic. The woman's body thus causes disruption as it enters into the public, male space. The epic scene thus gets radically revised and rewritten in this short story.

#### Endnotes:

- i The references to the *Mahabharata* are abbreviated as *Mbh* in parentheses.
- ii Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" Trans. Annette Kuhn. *Signs* 7.1 (Autumn 1981), 49.
- iii Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn. R Warhol and Dianne Price Herndl. (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd,1997), 442.
- iv Spivak, Foreword, 11.

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