

Female Body as a Site of Resistance in “Draupadi”

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Abstract

“Darupadi,” the epic character, is subversively presented by Mahasweta Devi’s short story challenging patriarchal and oppressive social systems. The story depicts how patriarchal power establishes itself as a hazard to the female other by trailing the prerequisites of contingencies that meld together history, politics and social systems. Draupadi challenges the society through transgression and ruination which can override the normal interpretive strategies of a society where the female other is imposed with a subjective self-consolidation. What is unachievable by the female other is indistinctly reproofed through a keen defiance of sexual differential. Thus, female body becomes a site for resistance subverting imposition of patriarchal authority and power in order to disengage gender through violence. Draupadi counters patriarchal power through body to overcome isolation, destitution and desertion from the social institutions that are supposed to fashion the rights of women. Body shaming and dishonour, consequently, becomes a site for enunciation to counter act the deployment of power over the body. This essay attempts to map how Devi, in her story, employs and asserts female body as a site of resistance.

Keywords: Draupadi, Spivak, Body, Resistance, Power

Introduction

“Draupadi” is a tribalised and demythicised version of the epic character Draupadi. Situated in Santhal tribe, Dopdi, a naxal activist of the seventies radically challenges authoritarianism, hegemony and patriarchal value systems. Draupadi, who cannot pronounce her Sanskrit name ‘Draupadi,’ is also known as Dopdi, the tribalized form of ‘Draupadi.’ While Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharata* is a renowned character, Dopdi is on the list of the wanted. *Mahabharata* is “an accretive epic, where the “scared” geography of an ancient battle is slowly expanded by succeeding generations of poets so that the secular geography of the expanding Aryan colony can present itself as identical with it and thus

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justify itself” (Spivak 387). The character tenders an instance for a brutal contract between men, the “efficient cause” for lengthy battle. Senanayak, the army officer who detains and humiliates Dopdi, is a “pluralist aesthete” contributing in the “production of an exploitative society” (Spivak 381). Senanayak kills Dopdi’s husband, Dulna with the help of Dukhiram Gharai and uses the dead body as a snare to trap her. The brave and courageous Dopdi ethically enunciated and faithfully followed the code of the tribe which in turn allowed Senanayak to calculate her shifts and moves that he could apprehend her. Within the episode of capture and humiliation, Senanayak establishes himself as a menace to the female other by pursuing the preconditions of eventualities that braids the “historical moment.” Senanayak is preset within class foundations reflecting the “gentlemen revolutionaries” who are dormant and oblique. His “doublethink” and innate incongruities are explicitly seen in theory not in praxis.

“Draupadi” 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” (Spivak 386). Thus, the story necessitates a “historical mircology” to decipher the settings and prospects of Dopdi’s subverting intentions. What might be considered as an “interpretive” scheme veils the possibilities of freedom to the female subject through self-consolidation of the self. The personal becomes political (See Spivak 382) by indistinguishably entwining history and politics distinctively with the “sexual differential.” Stripping is a political reprimand given to Dopdi but she remains naked publicly. Dopdi is “at once a palimpsest and a contradiction” (Spivak388). The unattainable historical is implicitly found in the sexual differential that is expressed through the body “subject” that poignantly defy the reputation attributed to the sexual. Thus, she challenges patriarchy to confront her as an unconfirmed “objective historical monument” (Spivak 389).

Draupadi is a meta-narrative that subverts authoritarianism and chauvinism by challenging conservative traditions that mute the tribal and gendered subaltern. An explicit portrayal of violence on a tribal woman and her ultimate resistance by denying clothing brings to light the exploitive and suppressive nature of political power:

“Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn.”

“Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says “water” she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?” (Devi 401).

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Dopdi, the reincarnation of mythical Draupadi does not receive any divine aid as she is cruelly gang raped multiple times. She is isolated and has no place to go: “Where do you want me to go?” (Devi 401). Senanayak, the supposed guardian of law and order, let Dopdi to be gang raped by men in uniform. The act of disrobing and rape is a moment of teleological reversal and resistance to shaming:

“Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.”

“Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid.”

“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 *counter* me—come on *counter* me” (Devi 402).

The bodily shaming is challenged by snubbing to wear clothes. The imposition of power is transmuted into a device to challenge the oppressor who intends to subdue her body and psyche. When Senanayak dishonours Dopdi by raping her, she refuses to be dishonoured by the patriarchal outfit that encloses sexuality. It is through dishonour Dopdi’s body assumes honour. The irony and the incongruity of hegemony that imposes codes violate the honour of the marginalized. She challenges men to counter her when she turns her bruised body as a site of resistance. Exposing her body, Dopdi concurrently avows “a deliberate refusal of a shared sign system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter effects of shame confusion and terror in the enemy” (Sunder 352).

Dopdi’s body offers a critical enunciatory space where moral superiority and bureaucratic authority is confronted. Dopdi’s “resistance, ironically, is not mounted by a disavowal of her identity as a woman, but through what is most desired, her body, which she places for further consumption to her oppressory, an act that confronts her oppressor in uncompromising terms” (Choudry 173). Violence on Dopdi’s body is a perceptible subjective violence performed by an explicit specific political agent. The exhibition of power through violence is traumatic in its effect that is located in historical time and space. However, Dopdi was brave enough to counter:

“Naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high.”

“Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation. What is the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (Devi 402).

Subjective violence “enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds” (Zizek 10) is noticeable on Dopdi’s body. What was enacted as a “self-enhancing circulation” and imposition of power is disregarded and resisted by Dopdi by self-

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engendering her own body. Senanayak exhibits a “politics which renounces a set of universal axioms and a politics which renounces the very constitutive dimension of the political, since it resorts to fear as its ultimate mobilising principle” (Zizek 40) to impose violence on the body of Dopdi. Dopdi’s body becomes a metaphorized object that instils the contrariety of self-representation and thereby exhibiting resistance. While Spivak finds similarities in the complicit institutions that objectify Third World Woman, the exploitative machinery Senanayak is part of is a bigger network of power relations that brings an ideological impasse through bureaucracy and authority. Senanayak’s epistemic assumption that he could over power woman’s body and defile it by rape the nature of authoritarian politics. However, Dopdi, instead of complying with dominant politics, confronts Senanayak with body, the site of resistance and engendering power. Thereby, Dopdi’s “honor is retained and *Dharma* is sustained” (Khanna 112). Dopdi’s body as a catachresis salvages what was repressed from a metaphorical and differential performative position which articulates resistance. While the “animalistic savageness underscores the hideous nature of the rape, where Dopdi’s body is treated like a carcass, like raw meat. Devi refuses to eroticize the rape or the grant narrative power of the rapists” (Thompson and Gunne 9). Dopdi’s body becomes an agent of resistance that has wider implications because her body remains unchallenged when presented as a site of resistance. The inhuman brutalizing tendency of Senanayak and his men are denied the power over female body. While denying the rapists the authority to shame, Dopdi is ashamed to cry. Instead of allowing tears to veil over shame, Dopdi displays an insolence that surprises Senanayak. Dopdi’s “counter-intuitive mode of defiance” “reinforces the reappropriation of power that Dopdi comes to embody” (Thompson and Gunne 9). Thus, Dopdi denies the arithmetic that neither is human being is political nor an object of any system.

Foucault politicizes body from the perspective of discipline and micro power. The consequence of power on body is subjectivity and thereby subjectivity is embodied. Dopdi’s body is a site for political and cultural struggle that assumes centrality to subjectivity and agency. Body as a naturalistic-material object with biological functions is socially inscribed. Materiality of female body is historically determined and culturally influenced given a repressive situation as in the case of Dopdi. Female body as a cultural inscription assumes “materiality prior to signification and form” (Butler 177). Such a signification is self-engendering and emphasize on the potential for resistance when social norms exhibit its influence on female body by configuring subjectivity and the condition of subjectivity. To examine the socio-political speculation of the body and the micro dynamics of power preconceives the importance of being self-enabled activity. When power is concentrated on body, “the violence-ideology opposition, the metaphor of property, the model of the contract or of conquest; that where knowledge is concerned—one abandons the opposition between what is

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‘interested’ and what is ‘disinterested,’ the model of knowledge and the primacy of the subject” (Foucault, *Discipline* 28). Therefore, body is imbued with an ontological power to challenge the model of concentrated power that opposes through disinterestedness and knowledge. The microphysics of power that is imposed on the Dopdi’s body operates through social systems creating docile bodies. Docile bodies “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). However, docile bodies, as in Dopdi, can also disconnect power from the body (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). The imposition of bio power operates through rape; a mode of shaming that is inscribed on female body. Dopdi transforms her body into a site of protest and resistance to hegemonic culture, politics and power. Body as a text of culture and locus of social control refers to the way bodily experiences that are effected in the daily life. However, cultural practices impose power on body as an epistemic object that shapes into particular disciplinary practices. Therefore, the capillary model of power that operates through institutions is subverted through the rebellious body of Dopdi that colludes with the subjectivity. Consequently, virtuosity and knowledge of one’s own body can be obtained only when one experiences the “effect of an investment of power in the body” (Foucault, “Body/Power” 56). As a result, the path way to the realization of one’s own body evolves through the desire. However, power configures such an effect that inquisitively enunciates to respond the affirmation of one’s own body: “Power after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body” (Foucault, “Body/Power”56).

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