

RAPE VICTIMS AS TODAY'S SUBALTERN : KNOWLEDGE OF THE POWER OF FEMININITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'DRAUPADI'

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Received: December 09, 2018

Accepted: January 17, 2019

ABSTRACT: Rape victims are considered as today's subaltern in this paper. As the number of rape victims are increasing day by day and the fact that even children and old women are not spared, it is very important to focus on this matter. The fact that many of the rape victims succumb to suicide is alarming and raises the need to discuss what can be done. This paper focuses on how the protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' rises like a phoenix after the gang rape which gives us a knowledge of the power of femininity.

Key Words: Rape, rape victims, mahasweta devi, draupadi, femininity, subaltern, gang rape.

The atrocities against female sex, whether it be women or young children, are increasing tremendously and if they are subalterns, they are double victims. This paper entitled RAPE VICTIMS AS TODAY'S SUBALTERN : KNOWLEDGE OF THE POWER OF FEMININITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'DRAUPADI' represents rape victims as today's subaltern. Textualising sexual crimes in an unresolvable endeavour. Sex has a frequently neglected political aspect according to Kate Millet as she argues in her seminal essay 'Sexual Politics'. In Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen, the tribal revolutionary protagonist who is arrested and gang-raped in custody, turns the terrible wounds of her breast into a counter-offensive. With a feminist vision, the "unarmed target" Dopdi Mejhen in this short story uses her female body as her arm to counter-attack the beastly patriarchal supremacy that tore her feminine self apart, proving what Simone de Beauvoir says in her *The Second Sex* :

"One is not born but rather becomes a woman".

Feminism is the revolutionary movement that ventures into a historic mission to demolish the age-old prejudice of women as the second sex, the defiled, bounded in the four walls of the house, as an object of pleasure, a reproductive machine, and a slave to work on the domestic chores. Her opposition to all structures and institutions that formalize power is the foundation of feminist literature. Women's writing is the literature of silence, its meaning lies enclosed and camouflaged for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and repressed. Writing in itself has always been an act of courage for women writers. Women's writing is therefore a total revolt against the mainstream male domination by dismantling the concept of the all-inclusive male "I".

The term 'Subaltern', literally meaning "of inferior rank" is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and communist who was imprisoned for a long time by Mussolini's police (from 1926) until his death at age 46. In prison, he wrote notebooks on politics and history and philosophy. Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" in his *Prison Notebooks* (1973). Gramsci's account of the subaltern is concerned with the conditions of the poor working class. He declared that the subaltern was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerted its hegemonic influence. The term 'subaltern' is identified with the social groups who are excluded from the society's established structures for political representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian literary theorist, re-read the Gramscian term 'subaltern' and widened the scope of the term 'subaltern' from poor working class to the minoritites and also the women bound by the four walls of patriarchy, especially the women of the East and in particular the women of India. Spivak goes on to elaborate the problems of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situation of gendered subject and of Indian women in particular. According to her, the ideological construction of the gender keeps the male dominant. Spivak concludes her essay saying that the subaltern cannot speak.

Of all the classes of women in India, the women who belong to the tribal and Dalit community and considered untouchables are doubly affected. They are a minority and their gender difference also makes their plight, doubly worse. Mahasweta Devi's short-story 'Draupadi' from *Breast Stories* presents the gang rape victim Dopdi as a perfect exemplum of Subaltern Feminism where she resurrects like a phoenix and left

the “armed” officers shivering at the sight of her mutilated female body walking towards them like an undefeated warrior.

The Grants to Indian Tribal Governments Program authorized in Title IX of the Violence Against Women Act of 2005 is designed to enhance the ability of the tribes to respond to violent crimes against women, enhance the victim’s safety, and develop education and prevention strategies. But such grants only remain on the white papers of the Constitution, when the mainlanders take the silence of the subaltern and their ignorance for granted.

No one practices untouchability when it comes to sex. Mahasweta Devi, an Indian social activist and writer, best described as the crusader of the Bengali tribals, she often depicts the brutal oppression of the tribal peoples and the untouchables by the authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials in her elaborate Bengali fiction. She is a long-time champion for the political, social, and economic advancement of these communities, whom she characterizes as “suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century”. (Imaginary Maps, XI) This activism is central to Devi’s understanding of the role of a writer in society. In response to the question, “What would you like to do for the rest of your life?” in a 1998 interview Devi replied:

“Fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time.” (Guha) This spirit of Mahasweta Devi found discourse in her short-story ‘Draupadi’ from her short story collection *Breast Stories*, where the protagonist becomes the spokesperson for the ideologies of the author and her vision as to how feminism should emancipate the subaltern women in the tribal societies of her homeland.

Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* is a cluster of short fiction with the breast as a common motif. In these short-stories – ‘Draupadi’, ‘Breast-giver’, ‘Breast the Bodice’- breast is more than a mere symbol, as Spivak points out in her introduction to this short storycollection. It becomes the means of harsh indictment of an exploitative social system. Of these three short stories our concern is ‘Draupadi’ which presents the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen as a feminist exemplar to all the subaltern women of India and in particular to the tribal women of Bengal.

One important point to be noted is that when Draupadi was searched for, and till she was apprehended Mahasweta Devi refers to her and shows her as a mild figure. After being brutally raped, a kind of hauntedness we find with her. She spoke up when the men surrounded her thought that they broke her. Draupadi came closer to the Senanayak; standing with her hand on her hip she laughs and says:

The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make up, don’t you want to see how they made me? (Devi 37)

The Senanayak asked where her clothes were and she said she would not wear any clothes, that she tore them. She wiped the blood on her palm and with a terrifying and sharper voice as her ululation she put before him certain questions which were the subaltern’s queries to the hegemonical patriarchal upper-class men:

What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (Devi 37)

With this question Draupadi questions the manliness of man and she asserts, “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed”. She brings in a new feminist ideology that a man can easily strip a woman but can he clothe her back again? A real man is the one who respects the honour of the woman.

In ‘Draupadi’, named after Mahabharata’s heroine Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi’s lower-caste protagonist is given the name by her upper-caste mistress. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses in her Introduction why the title of the short-story is ‘Draupadi’ whereas the name of the protagonist is Dopdi Mejhen. Draupadi is a Kshatriya name and a lower caste tribal cannot take a Kshatriya name and so the name Draupadi was shortened to Dopdi. This itself has the theme of subaltern identity of the protagonist of the short-story. Unlike the mythical Draupadi who pleads to Lord Krishna Dopdi gathers her mental strength and shows off her torn and raped female body and thereby shaming her shame:

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Devi 37)

Sigmund Freud is considered responsible by the feminist psychoanalysts for the power politics that men proclaims for the penis they got which is a ‘lack’ in the female body. This patriarchal pride is satirized by Mahasweta Devi by her phrase “ the male organ of the gun” in her short-story ‘Draupadi’.

Man is considered ‘Whole’, and women ‘hole’, because of the anatomical differences. Man is considered as the primary sex and woman “ the second sex” even in the holy scriptures. “The Second Sex” is the phrase coined by Simon de Beauvoir to denote the gender inequality prevalent in the ideology of

patriarchy which rules the world. According to her men are the “subjects” of their own lives, the actors; women are “objects”, the acted upon. Men are normative human beings, “the One”; women are “the Other”. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other. She says,” One is not born, but rather becomes , a woman”, in her book *The Second Sex*. The sexual, biological and anatomical differences in both the sexes not only lead to a gender inequality but also to an ideology that man is the supreme sex and woman just his subordinate. The whole body of police officers try to ‘make her up’ by raping her, to “make up” the “most notorious female” in the police records. Here we find when sexual politics getting worked out a woman is just reduced to a ‘hole’ and men can dominate her by raping her.

Dopdi proved that a female body is powerful enough to make any giant man tremble when it is in its supreme state where honour and dishonour becomes alike. The subaltern Dopdi succeeds in achieving that supreme state and can thus justly be described as , THE FEMINIST EXEMPLAR. This paper thus focuses on the rise of feminism and women empowerment that Dopdi Mejhen, the protagonist of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ represents. Dopdi, the tribal revolutionary protagonist who is arrested and gang-raped in custody, turns the terrible wounds of her breast into a counter-offensive. With a feminist vision, the “unarmed target” Dopdi Mejhen uses her female body as her arm to counter –attack the beastly patriarchal supremacy that tore her feminine self apart. To conclude, Dopdi highlights as to how real feminism should be. Being looted of her female respect, Dopdi does not go to finish off herself like other victims of rape, but fights back courageously with her head held high as an exemplum and as a threat to the beastly patriarchal system of her times. Thus Dopdi, the subaltern, is the new woman, the emancipated and the real feminist exemplar.

Today’s world we have innumerable Dopdi around us. Shockingly even children fall victims of brutal rapes and even gang rapes. But how many rise up as Dopdi? Activists like Sunitha Krishnan who was gang raped at the age of eight, but overcame it and paved way by being the co-founder of Prajwala, an organization that rescues, rehabilitates and reintegrates sex-trafficked victims into society. Dopdi is a harbinger of hope to the victims of rape. Dopdi uses her mutilated body as her weapon; it is her knowledge of the power of femininity that made her a phoenix. Women must not think themselves weak in their female body. Rape victims are the subalterns of today’s society. Knowledge of one’s self and the power of femininity that Dopdi exemplified is all that it takes for all Dopdis to turn into phoenix.

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