

The Female Body as a Site of Violence and Resistance: Reclaiming Female Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Abstract

The female body has always been objectified either for amassing economic profit or for eulogizing the male power. The male gaze dramatizes the already existing inequality between men and women by privileging the male viewer while dehumanizing the female object of view. However, what happens when the female body refuses to give voyeuristic pleasure to the male gaze and instead threatens the foundation of masculinity? By analyzing Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi*, my paper will examine how the female body can be a powerful weapon to resist the male gaze. It aims to explore the significance of women using nakedness as a powerful form of embodied resistance against the oppressive violence of the state. What cultural contexts give rise to these radical protests? How effectively do they confront the gendered violence perpetrated by the state and challenge the patriarchal narratives that perpetuate such violence on a broader scale? These questions are crucial for understanding the impact of women's activism in transforming societal perceptions of gender and power

Keywords: Mahabharata, Gender Discrimination, Male Gaze, Naked Protest, Female Body.

Introduction

Ioan Petru Culianu very authoritatively claims: "Where indeed women speak little with words, their bodies are the most spoken of because they have the most to tell" (1995, 1). A great example of such a claim is perhaps *Draupadi/Dopdi*'s encounter with Senanayak in Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi*, published in Bengali in 1978 and published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1981 as a translation in English by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. Spivak's mammoth achievement through this translation has been the fluidity with which she has enabled cultural border crossings that allow a greater understanding of difference among women in different cultural locations. Spivak has been able to locate the peculiar predicament of the Santhal tribe on par with other indigenous people such as the Native Americans or the aborigines in Australia. Her translation places *Dopdi* on the global platform drawing the attention of Western feminism to the impossibility of imposing one interpretative grid on a multiplicity of female lives by privileging the category of "woman" over those of race, ethnicity, class and nationality.

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Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a memorable milestone in the history of feminist writings— Indian as well as Western. Mahasweta Devi focuses on the real-life trials and tribulations of marginalized people whose voice has been suppressed in the mainstream discourse of Indian history. Her understanding of the plight of the marginalized people is a sincere concern demanding personal involvement in their life and work, fueled with a desire to upgrade their life socially, politically, and culturally. She unravels the heart-wrenching history of the marginalized to deliver a searing commentary on the inhuman injustice meted out on women through the deliberate and humiliating erasure of their individuality. In the process, women are reduced to mere specimens squirming under the relentless microscope of the male gaze.

Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* refuses to succumb to the male gaze. Instead her aggressive stance issues an ominous threat to toxic masculinity. She reclaims her agency by deploying her naked body as a weapon to question norms and to find a new meaning in the body. Her naked protest serves as an ominous fictional precursor to real episodes of naked protest in the history of India. This paper will deal with the question of whether the protester's naked body serves as a powerful weapon of female destruction of the male gaze or merely accentuates the weakness and vulnerability of the woman reduced to a mere sex object. This paper employs a descriptive and analytical methodology. Secondary materials are utilized to understand *Draupadi's* rebellious attitude and certain theoretical concepts regarding the body. . The secondary sources include journal articles, E-Journals and various web sources. This paper examines how issues such as honour, shame, and chastity are closely interwoven with women's bodies within the patriarchal discourse. Several theoretical aspects of the female body have been thoroughly examined. It also discusses the male gaze theory and women's passivity. With reference to Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi, it examines how the female body can be a powerful weapon to resist the male gaze.

1. Gendered Construction of the Body and Women's Subordination

A brief survey of feminist assessments of the woman's body throws up interesting insights that would help us understand not only the *Mahabharata's* *Draupadi*, but also why reinvention in the form of Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* was so vitally necessary to the interests of the feminist cause. Body-centric literature that sanctions the subjection of the female body to male control is the standard norm. Michel Foucault describes the paradoxical state of the body as both a site of pleasure as well as punishment. He asserts that the body is a site upon which power operates. He proclaims that sex and gender are normative categories that are constructed as regulatory forces to govern or control an individual's body (1998, 104). Human beings are mere social performers who get entangled with a "pre-defined set of rules and expectations" (Khatana 2017, 33). Susan Bordo points out that "the human body is itself a potentially inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control" (1993, 21). From an early age, we are encouraged to acquire certain behavioral norms and practices in a feminine or masculine way, and our bodies become inscribed with cultural ethics and societal norms that categorize us dichotomously as men and women.

To illustrate further, a woman has been defined as a counterpart to man "the active, strong and moral half of a human whole" (Baily 1993, 99). The oppositional characteristics of men and women have been

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foregrounded by hierarchical binary constructions of mind/body, culture/nature dualisms. In the mind/body dualism, the mind and body are considered as separate entities where the former is deemed to be superior to the latter. Patriarchally and figuratively speaking, men have always been identified with mind/culture/reason while women have been relegated to the wrong side of the binary as representative of body/nature/emotion. An influential feminist, Susan Brownmiller considered the female body as a preordained and ahistorical entity that inherently succumbed to physical oppression (1975, 13). Emilia Aaltonen proclaimed that violence and vulnerability are principles interlinked with the gendered body that associates aggression and courage with masculinity, but equates weakness and vulnerability with femininity. The female body has been reduced to being the target of several victimizations either due to its physical inferiority or due to its gendered alignment with passivity and vulnerability (2012, 51). The very epithets “weak” and “concupiscent” (Shah 2019, 32) are imposed upon women by a deep-rooted patriarchal ideology. Controlling or disciplining machinery is organized to keep a check on women so that their unruly passions and appetites do not disrupt the male personality. Androcentric thought disallows a woman from being identified as autonomous, authoritarian social being, rather it defines her identity in terms of depravity and inequality. The way society gives meaning to the female body is very oppressive and exploitative to women.

2. Male Gaze and Women's Passivity

One of these gender roles imposed on women is the stereotypical expectation and societal insistence to flatter/cater/pander the male gaze. The male gaze accentuates the already existing inequality between men and women by perpetuating a hierarchy based on the superiority of men and the consequent subordination of women. The British feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey, coined the term “male gaze” in her 1970s essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In a world marked by sexual imbalance and a “split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 1975, 19), the term has acquired tremendous significance. Speaking in psychoanalytical term, Mulvey formulates her male gaze theory identifying ‘scopophilia’ as a dominant yardstick in organizing traditional Hollywood films. Scopophilia is a sexual pleasure instinct that involves looking. Women's roles are restricted by their “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1975, 19) while men are projected as the “bearer of the look of the spectator” (Mulvey 1975, 20). Foucault explores the power internalized in the very notion of gaze that is “connected to power and surveillance: the person who gazes is empowered over the person who is the object of the gaze” (1979, 39). The gaze apparatus institutionalizes the dichotomy of gender difference— masculine and feminine, privileging the male viewer while dehumanizing the female object of view. ‘Gaze’ is a psychological term that takes its stance from the thought of Jacques Lacan who used it to describe the anxious state of mind of one's possibility to be viewed. In his book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho Analysis*, Jacques Lacan states that the viewed object suffers from a loss of some authority or autonomy with the intimation that he/she is a visible object (1981, 21). A sexual politic embedded in the male gaze suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. In the male gaze, a woman is projected as an object to appease the carnal desire of a heterosexual male. It is an undeniable fact that

male dominance is a regulating force in constructing the so-called society across most of the countries. Women's existence has been perceived through the eyes of men. The male gaze denies women an autonomous, authoritarian identity, relegating them to the status of objects of desire appreciated for their glamorous appearance. Women's bodies have been crafted and fashioned by patriarchal cultures and institutions. Their bodies are vulnerable to manipulation and control. Ponterotto, in an article "Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the "Normatization" of the Female Body in Western Culture", opines that women have been systematically relegated to the confined space of the four walls of domesticity, the lowest rung of social hierarchy, and the feckless periphery of politics. Ironically the female body gets immense exposure as a material object to be viewed, evaluated, praised, and commodified for socially constructed purposes, mainly for male pleasure (2016, 134). In this context the comment of Dolezal is noteworthy: "Despite the invisibility of women as social subjects, the physical aspect of female bodies has traditionally been subject to heightened scrutiny; women are expected to maintain their form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatization and the loss of social capital" (2010, 357). The globalization of consumerism projects women's bodies as a profitable means to earn the highest revenue. Women's bodies have always been objectified either for amassing economic profit, or for eulogizing male power, or for sexualizing the female body. The rigidity of extreme patriarchal thought is found inscribed on the female body. The male gaze always objectifies the female body.

3. Feminist Appropriation of Draupadi as a Threat to the Male Gaze

Mahasweta Devi reinvents Draupadi in an "avatar" unimaginable and unacceptable in the context of the *Mahabharata's* Draupadi. In the words of Roshan G. Shahani and Shoba V. Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story *Draupadi* is "a calculated act of violence upon the received myth of Draupadi in the manner that it displaces the mythical character out of myth and class to insert her into history in the figure of the Naxal tribal Dopdi" (2000, 3815). Draupadi when transliterated into "Dopdi" becomes "a narrative of self-empowerment that invites feminist interpretation" (Chakravarty 2013, 126).

The Naxalite movement of the 1960s, a peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari region of the Indian state of West Bengal, serves as a background for the story of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. This revolutionary movement emerged out of long-term angst and disgust for the upper-class feudal landowners who exploited the lower caste cultivators by imposing exorbitant taxes and not paying reasonable wages. The exploitation of the tribal women was more crucial as they were subjected to sexual exploitation by the upper caste men. In the story, the protagonist Dopdi or Draupadi and her husband, Dulna are the chief instigators of the movement as they deploy certain methodologies to demolish the state power by attacking police stations, stealing guns, and subjecting landowners to death. *Draupadi* depicts the story of a draught-ridden village where scarcity of water has given rise to tribal mobilization. Surja Sahu, the feudal chief, owns two tube wells and three wells, but refuses to share a little bit of water with the tribals. This harsh denial of the basic right to life-giving water ignites the latent flame of revenge in the hearts of the tribals culminating in the murder of Surja Sahu. Dulna expresses his long-term resentment against

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Surja Sahu when he says, "I'll have the first blow, brothers. My greatgrandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labor to repay that debt" (Mahasweta 1981, 398). Dopdi gives vent to her anger when she expresses her urge to hurt Surja Sahu: "His mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll pull out his eyes" (Mahasweta 1981, 398). In the story, the Special Forces of the Indian Army in collaboration with the upper caste landowners take a stance to crush the rebellion. Senanayak, an army officer employs a panoptical gaze to keep a constant watch on the revolutionaries. He is very meticulous in investigating the behavior of his enemies. His obsession with the destruction of his enemies is blatant in his maxim: "*In order to destroy the enemy, become one*" (Mahasweta 1981, 394). By the means of "*apprehension and elimination*" (Mahasweta 1981, 394), he wants to destroy the unitary power of the revolutionaries. Dopdi and Dulna are forced to live in disguise as fugitives and work under different landowners of the Jharkhani belt area. However, ultimately Dulna succumbs to police bullets while drinking water from a stream in the forest.

The story begins when Dulna is already dead and Dopdi's name appears on the top of the list of wanted fugitives. The Special Forces are engaged in finding out the long-wanted Dopdi because she is the main culprit through whom they could reach the other insurgents. Despite her cunning and devious strategy, Dopdi is arrested by the police under the leadership of Senanayak. After being captured, she is cross-interrogated for an hour. But her stubborn determination to not disclose the whereabouts of her comrades places her at the mercy of Senanayak's command to his officers "Make her. *Do the needful*" (Mahasweta 1981, 401), a command that sanctions rape. Dopdi suffers the torment of male oppression as she is gang-raped repeatedly throughout the entire night. The brutality of the act is visible on her tattered body: mangled breasts, torn nipples, and bleeding vagina. The blood-chilling scene is portrayed very deftly in the words of Mahasweta Devi as she says, "Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven— then Draupadi had passed out" (Mahasweta 1981, 401). Custodial rape acts as a regulatory force usually wielded by the state law to bully female rebels who transgress the ambit of the conservative honour code back to their initial space of passive servility. Here Dopdi's rape is not only the gratification of male lust but also the projection of male brutality to threaten a woman who dares to challenge or disrupt gender roles. In a patriarchal setup, Rushika Gill says, rape is looked upon as a symbol of the power and authority of men. Women are raped with the presumption that the abuse of their bodies is the best way to violate their honor (2016, 105). In the morning, Senanayak orders Dopdi to be present in front of him. She acquiesces, but in a strikingly deliberate manner as she refuses to wipe the blood stains inflicted on her body and tears the piece of cloth that is offered to her for covering up her mutilated body. This act is in sharp contrast to the act of the *Mahabharata's* Draupadi who in the revered tradition of epic role models manages to cover her body by divinely unending garment despite shameless male aggression. Dushasana cannot disrobe Draupadi because tradition demands that she be saved from dishonor by divine intervention. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi finds no such protector. Having shed false qualms of shame implied in the act of rape, Dopdi appears before Senanayak completely naked. Her angry protest finds devastating expression in the following lines:

“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me—?” Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid. (Mahasweta 1981, 402)

Her tattered body upsets the presumption with which she is summoned to Senanayak. Her nudity dislodges the male gaze that would have otherwise provoked a feeling of shame on the female nude body. State power acts as a gendered institution where principal executives are upper caste men and army officers under systematic law. The imperious captain, Arjan Singh, asserts and affirms his masculinity with the explosion of “the *male organ* of a gun” (Mahasweta 1981, 393) which has an embedded interlink with the process of Dopdi’s rape as her body becomes mutilated under the rise and fall of “Active *pistons* of flesh” (Mahasweta 1981, 401). Dopdi challenges the gendered state by refusing to consider Senanayak “man”. She denies Senanayak’s masculinity on the ground that a real man is not supposed to execute his manly power on a female body. She compels Senanayak to witness the consequence of his given command, the ugliness of which he wilfully tries to ignore. An antithetical paradigm of Dopdi’s bodily gestures of looking like a victim and acting as an aggressor renders her oppressors speechless. She looks like a feckless victim of rape as her “Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds” (Mahasweta 1981, 402). Refusing the victim status that Senanayak desires to impose on her body, Dopdi appears naked as a threatening arsenal to dismantle the scripture of shame scripted by the bourgeois disciplinary power to keep a check on women’s unruly passions. As she stands fixedly naked before her oppressor, she insists on articulating her anguish. The tangibility of this act enables her to recuperate her lost honour as she inscribes a new meaning to her body. Her bodily gesture of confronting Senanayak conforms to Githa Hariharan’s statement: “When a woman’s naked body speaks, its language can turn the victimized body into a speaking, fighting one. Her body is no longer only for the powerful male to inscribe upon; her body turns her into an inscriber” (2017, 17). In the role of “inscriber” rather than “inscribed upon” she unleashes a latent power hitherto unknown and unexplored. As eloquently expressed by Radha Chakravarty:

Her body, the site of her subjugation by the men who rape her, also becomes the chosen instrument of her defiance. Confronting Senanayak in her nakedness at the end of the story, she figuratively forces her captors to confront an image of their own brutality, for which her exposed and mutilated body becomes a signifier. Contrary to Spivak’s claim, the subaltern in Mahasweta’s narrative can and does speak, and the vehicle of her resistance is her body. (2013, 130)

However, it is not only the confrontation with “an image of their own brutality” that triggers the sudden reversal of roles. Significantly, Dopdi uses her nude and wounded body as a weapon to resist the patriarchal male gaze. Partial nudity of the female body is always desirable and praised by the male spectator. John Berger observes that in the tradition of the nude, “*men act* and *women appear*” (1972, 47).

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Women are the object of men's gaze and portrayed as meek, submissive, passive, and available for men's sexual needs. Erotic fantasy is internalized by the male spectator at the site of the nude body. It increases a sexual desire which is termed as scopophilia that is a pleasure instinct at the site of the nudity. Senanayak wants to possess the whole body of Dopdi. The gender dichotomy is evident in the mode of punishment given to Dulna and Dopdi for the same crime. While Dulna meets a simple death, Dopdi has been sexually exploited and brutally wounded in the private parts. It is the male fascination for the complete subjugation of the female body. Dopdi's wounded body is contrasted with the notion of beauty symbolized by the "white, soft, pampered body" (Polinska 2000, 47). Her complete naked body with bare breasts does not imply any erotic invitation. Women's vagina as a sexual stimuli could arouse/intensify men's erotic pleasure. But, Dopdi's "Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood" (Mahasweta 1981, 402) do not incite lust in Senanayak. Through her act, she has transgressed the gender-oriented feminine attribute of shame. The acute physical and mental trauma of fear, pain, guilt, and shame patriarchally associated with the victim of rape is rejected and refuted. To quote Kanchana Mahadevan: "Draupadi dissociates the appellation of shame and fear that is always attached to the woman's body, especially to a rape victim. We see in the reconstructing of the body, an empowered site that enables the woman to act and the rejection of the body as an object of consumption or a property that can be abused" (2002, 206).

Thus we see that Dopdi stands tall and unafraid, and under her unwavering female gaze, the lascivious male gaze is lowered. Since the possessor of the gaze is always the strong and powerful owner and proprietor, he/she is inevitably the challenger, arrogant and unassailable. When Senanayak finds himself in the role of "receiver" rather than "sender" of the gaze, he becomes "terribly afraid" (Mahasweta 1981, 402). The dichotomy between the active presence of the male viewer and the passive presence of the naked woman is inverted or deconstructed. Dopdi's reclamation of her autonomous identity from an object of being hunted to the subject of an active agent takes place in her confrontation with Senanayak. She no longer squirms under the merciless male gaze, but acquires the brazen aggression of the "gazer". There is a complete reversal of roles. The male "gazer" becomes the "gazed upon". The "hunter" becomes the "hunted". The "empowered" becomes the "disempowered". When Dopdi seizes the space of the gazer, she sheds and rejects the mantle of male-engineered shame and honor to articulate her rebellion against a culturally programmed value system. In the face of the final confrontation, "Dopdi undergoes a kind of apotheosis. She becomes a larger-than-life image of female self-empowerment, striking terror into the heart of her beholders" (Chakravarty 2013, 130).

The concluding scene in *Draupadi* is a rewriting of the crucial scene of the "disrobing of Draupadi" in the epic *Mahabharata*. The two scenes make an interesting study in contrast, and provide sufficient fodder for feminist writers to reclaim the female body. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, the principal protagonist of the epic holds her unique position in the grand saga of the androcentric narrative where male personalities are glorified for their virility and masculine vigor, excellent war skills, and political diplomacy. Draupadi's body is the site upon which male authority has repeatedly left its imprint. Her enigmatic beauty proves to be a curse for her subsequent victimization to the male gaze in several incidents as for example during her *swayamvara*, during the attempted disrobing in the game of dice,

during her abduction by Jayadrath, and during her sexual assault at the hands of Keechak. She attracts our attention mostly because of her unconventional fate and tragic life, be it her unconventional birth from the sacrificial fire, her polyandrous marriage to the most glorious five brothers, Pandavas, or her subsequent molestations. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi proves herself to be a learned scholar and a good dialectician, well versed in the codified system of laws and ethics. She makes a verbal protest and posits several questions to shake the very false foundation of *dharma* based on which the patriarchal society normalizes and justifies several injustices on women. Her questions remain unanswered even by the most learned scholars, wise elders, and reputable kings assembled in the royal hall. Draupadi's autonomy receives a jolt when an unexpected turn of events compels her to become the victim of a polyandrous marriage with the five brothers who claim their collective rights over her. The final humiliation is overwhelming when Yudhisthira, Draupadi's elder husband stakes her in a game of dice and loses her to his cousin brothers - the Kauravas. Draupadi suffers the ignominy of a mere possession. Dushasana, one among the Kauravas, drags her in by her hair to the court only to project their winning exultation upon her body by disrobing her in public to communicate a clear message to the Pandavas that they have no more rights over her as she has become the possession of the Kauravas. The horrifying scene of the game of dice reverses the fate of Draupadi, reducing the queen to the status of a *dasi* or a slave who could be possessed by her new masters. Draupadi prays to Lord Krishna in utter helplessness. The *Mahabharata* as a male-authoritative epic requires Draupadi's honour to be protected only by a male God, and Vyasa has very artistically devised a "deus ex machina" in Lord Krishna to cover Draupadi's body with an un-ending drapery.

Unlike the epic Draupadi who is born in a royal family and divinely graced, the protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's story is a poor girl who belongs to a Santhal tribe. Her name Draupadi/Dopdi was bestowed upon her as an act of benevolence by Surja Sahu's wife at whose home Dopdi's mother was working. The epic Draupadi shows her scholarly knowledge through several episodes, but Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi is an illiterate woman whose regional language is undecipherable even to the learned scholars. While the epic heroine poses unsolvable questions that puzzle the scholarly elders and encourage her husbands to avenge her humiliation, Dopdi proves to be the sole and active agent in demolishing her victimizers. As a subaltern tribal Santhal in twentieth century Bengal in India she suffers the status of a doubly marginalized female subaltern - a stark portrayal of which is found in Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor . . . It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (2001, 82–83)

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Yet, Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi does speak— not only with her tongue, but also with her entire body. S. Arockia Anto Anita rightfully says that Mahasweta Devi has reconstructed “the myth of a subaltern woman as her protagonist breaks away from the shackles of false notions of shame” (2016, 136). Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* proves to be a feminist assertion as her protagonist employs her “wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized identity” (Huger 2012, 154). In a similar vein Nikhat Hoque too proclaims:

Dopdi's body becomes a site of both the exertion of authoritarian power and of gendered resistance. Her refusal to be clothed goes against the phallogocentric power, and the exploitation of her body gives her the agency to step away from her hegemonic patriarchy of the policemen. (2019)

Indeed, Dopdi is a hunter, a fighter, a gazer and an empowered equivalent to her male counterpart. Her body becomes simultaneously a receptacle for both violence and a launch pad for resistance. And thus, to answer the initial question posed in the beginning, Dopdi is not a weak and vulnerable sex object, but a weapon of merciless destruction of the male gaze since she can hold it, challenge it, and force it to withdraw in fear and shame. To quote Chakravarty: “the ravished Dopdi is transformed into a terrifying figure of vengeful female wrath” (2013, 132).

4. Theatrical Performance of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and the Subsequent Naked Protest

The impact of the terror is felt even more strongly in the gut when Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi of the short story finds flesh and blood embodiment on the stage. While the short story allows only a visualization, the actual enactment on stage is too horrendous to be stomachable by audiences conditioned and programmed by comforting patriarchal delusions. Kanhailal Heisnam, a renowned theatre director, gauged the dramatic potential of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* to make a theatrical performance of a play by the same name in the Manipuri language in 2000 to show the crude reality of the suffering of Manipuri women at the hands of the army officers. Heisnam Sabitri, Kanhailal's wife, plays the role of Dopdi/Draupadi. Her enactment of the character of Dopdi who refuses to put on her clothes when she is summoned to the chief officer after she has been repeatedly raped by the army officers overwhelms the other actors on stage as well as the audience. She takes a bold step to cast off her dress on stage, thus disturbing the conventionality of theatrical production. Her nakedness on the stage puts the audience to shame. As Saptaparna Roy says, “The impact of this unprecedented episode on stage is like a double-edged sword moving both the male characters on the stage as well as the audience” (2019, 7). An instant feeling of fear and disgust at the atrocities committed by the army officers strikes the characters on stage as well as the audience. A rape victim is supposed to feel a sense of shame. But Sabitri reconstructs the sequence of events by resolutely confronting the male gaze and refusing to be cowed down by it, thus enforcing a feeling of shame upon her victimizers. The naked body which is a site of male eroticism becomes a powerful weapon to resist the male gaze. Through her body, she creates an autonomous identity and destroys the socio-cultural stereotyping of women as fragile and desirable. The unfortunate

paradox lies in the ambiguous implication that on the one hand, the female body is sexually commodified and subjected to the dominating male gaze, while on the other hand the same naked body can function as a tool of resistance leading to the discrepant or antithetical outcome of social outrage. Though the play is popular, it has received negative responses and reviews forcing critical attention to a much-discussed topic on the social forum. A few critics accuse Kanhailal of perversion and consider Sabitri immodest because of the obscene act of baring her body in public. In *The Lightning Testimonies*, Sabitri responds to the negative comments on her performance, urging her critics to examine the context which made such self-shaming mandatory.

Many people in Manipur said, “Sabitri, what you have done is disrespectful to women . . .” You write this because you don’t think it through. Not one, many women have been stripped, and their rape took place in front of their husbands and fathers in law. The Indian Army raped them while making their fathers and husbands watch. Their fathers in law and husbands could only keep looking. You, who are educated, and write books . . . you don’t understand that when I play Draupadi and take my clothes off, it’s nothing to take my clothes off, it’s about my insides, my feelings. (2007)

However, this play had a prophetic implication and Kanhailal was conferred with the title of “chingu” in the Manipuri language meaning a wise man who can predict future. Significantly, four years later, the fiction of the play became fact in Manipur when twelve middle-aged women marched in naked protest against the rape and extrajudicial murder of Manorama Devi by the Assam Rifle Army Officers. Manorama Devi was accused of militancy by the Assam Rifle personnel who entered her house and forcefully dragged her out in the presence of her brother and mother. A few hours later her bullet-ridden body was found lying on the ground far away from her house. Marks of semen and terrible wounds all over her body proved that she had been raped and murdered brutally. This incident enraged the people, and led to subsequent public protests, marches, and demands for the repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Acts (AFSPA) of 1958. The most vibrant protest was articulated by a group of Meitei women who stripped themselves naked and gathered at the main gate of Kanglafort where the head office of the Assam Rifle officers was situated. Holding a banner with the inscription “Indian Army: Rape Us! Indian Army Take Our Flesh!” they shouted that they were all Manorama’s mothers.

Significantly, the liberal and obsessive use of phrases such as “our motherland” and “our mother tongue” in nationalist discourse reflects a euphoria of patriotic passion for the nation. Our country India is lovingly addressed as *Bharat Mata*. Thus there is a close connection between our nation and universal motherhood. The term “motherhood” in itself is embedded with a pure, aesthetic connotation. It needs to be protected for the glory of the country. Mothers are valorized as caretakers of children and bearers of cultural and traditional values. Significantly, female bodies representing the motherland must be inviolate and immune to contamination. By announcing themselves as mothers of Manorama, the Meitei women evoked a sense of motherhood to shame the army officers who were engaged in protecting the nation. By

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consistently invoking their maternal status and urging rape, they projected their naked bodies as resisting weapons to shame Manorama's assaulters.

On 21 September 2016, the same play was performed by the students of the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana in a function commemorating the recent death of Mahasweta Devi. The play itself was part of the university's academic curriculum. But the outcome or aftermath of the play was devastating as it enraged the families of army personnel to participate in an angry protest led by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Bharatiya Janata Party. In this context, a conservative patriarchal nationalism took recourse to eulogize the Indian soldiers who protected our country by sacrificing their lives. This protest completely sidestepped the feminist insight of women's ongoing oppression, and highlighted how much the play had offended public sentiments by showing soldiers in a poor light. The students were accused of being anti-national. The ABVP demanded suspension and severe punishment for two concerned professors Snehasweta Manav and Manoj Kumar. It is a very surprising fact that those who demanded the suspension and severe punishment for the students and the concerned professors were hardly familiar with Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* and the performance of the play.

5. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Dopdi in her story boldly rejects the male gaze. Her assertive stance serves as a powerful challenge to toxic masculinity. By utilizing her naked body as a tool, she reclaims her autonomy and confronts societal norms, ultimately reshaping the prevailing definition of the body. This act of naked protest in fiction foreshadows actual instances of naked protest in Indian history, signifying its profound impact. Dopdi reclaims her independent identity from being a hunted object to becoming the active subject in her confrontation with Senanayak. She no longer submits to the relentless male gaze but instead adopts the bold aggression of the observer. This shift results in a complete role reversal: the male observer becomes the one being observed. When Dopdi takes on the observer role, she rejects the male-imposed shame and honour, expressing her rebellion against a culturally ingrained value system. Dopdi engages in an act of resistance where her presence is stripped of its erotic connotations and is free from the sexist and socially imposed sense of shame. Nakedness bears multifarious connotations as it is contextual and historically specific. It may imply a pleasurable site or an insulting overtone depending on the context, on the person who is tearing apart his/her clothes, and on the supposed spectator's response. The meaning attributed to the exhibition of some body parts or the whole body may vary in time and space. In the context of this paper, the three situations of Dopdi's naked protest, Sabitri's discarding of clothes on stage, and the Meitei women's naked protest deliberately dismantle the prevalent male fascination for feminine beauty. The male gaze is not appeased as their naked bodies do not flaunt sexuality. Their bodies do not conform to those of sexy supermodels or beauty stars that the male gaze is accustomed to feasting on. They use their naked bodies as a threatening object or an objectionable oration that their mouths could never have uttered.

The exploration of Draupadi's character is more fascinating when we expand our critical lens to incorporate broader themes. A comparative analysis with other epic heroines across world literature can enrich our understanding of her significance and elevate her story globally. Draupadi's narrative can be interpreted in new and alternative ways by comparing different literary and non-literary genres, such as performance arts like theatre and dance. Each retelling of her story creates a new understanding—an epistemology—that serves as a vital moment of creativity and critical engagement.

جسد الأنثى كموقع للعنف والمقاومة: استعادة الوكالة الأنثوية في دروبادي لماهاشويتا ديفي

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الملخص

لقد تم إضفاء الطابع الموضوعي على جسد الأنثى على الدوام إما من أجل جمع الربح الاقتصادي أو من أجل مدح القوة الذكورية، إن النظرة الذكورية تضيء طابعاً درامياً على عدم المساواة القائمة بالفعل بين الرجال والنساء من خلال منح الامتياز للمشاهد الذكري مع نزع الصفة الإنسانية عن موضوع النظرة الأنثوية. ومع ذلك، ماذا يحدث عندما يرفض جسد الأنثى منح المتعة التلصصية للنظرة الذكورية ويهدد بدلاً من ذلك أساس الرجولة؟ من خلال تحليل قصة ماهاشويتا ديفي القصيرة "دراوبادي"، ستفحص ورقتي البحثية كيف يمكن لجسد الأنثى أن يكون سلاحاً قوياً لمقاومة النظرة الذكورية. وتهدف إلى استكشاف أهمية استخدام النساء للعري كشكل قوي من أشكال المقاومة المجسدة ضد العنف القمعي للدولة، وما هي السياقات الثقافية التي تؤدي إلى هذه الاحتجاجات الجذرية؟ وإلى أي مدى تواجه النساء العنف القائم على النوع الاجتماعي الذي ترتكبه الدولة وتتحدى السرديات الأبوية التي تديم مثل هذا العنف على نطاق أوسع؟ هذه الأسئلة حاسمة لفهم تأثير نشاط المرأة في تحويل التصورات المجتمعية للجنس والقوة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المهابهارتا، التمييز بين الجنسين، النظرة الذكورية، الاحتجاج العاري، جسد الأنثى.

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