

THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI* AND INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE GAME OF BHAIRAVI*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) and Indira Goswami (1942-2011) are few of the most prominent women writer-activists of the post-independent India. The objective of the paper is to undertake a comparative analysis on Devi's short story, *Draupadi* and Goswami's short story, *The Game of Bhairavi* in terms of gendered marginalisation. The stories expose the cruel patriarchal tradition of the Indian society. Since time immemorial, women are considered as the 'weak section' of the society but not the 'other half.' Voice of the gendered subaltern is a much debated domain in the writings of women novelists. Sexual violence is an outcome of a handicapped society where male chauvinists rule. The power of resistance and bodily acts of the marginalized women is explored in this paper.

Keywords: Subaltern, patriarchy, gendered marginalisation, sexual violence, female identity.

INTRODUCTION

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, to marginalize is an act "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power". History is a witness to women's sufferings. Since long women have been treated as slaves and objectified. Women have performed the role of both 'M-other' and the 'Other.' No matter how the world changes, no matter which country and social system people live, no one can deny women's marginalization in history. Though women are worshipped in India in the form of *Kali*, *Durga* and *Shakti* yet the orthodox patriarchal society through the means of force and constraints like the sati system, child marriages, denial of education to women, put restraint on their movement at social, political and educational levels. In the twenty-first century, women empowerment and equality is stressed but remains behind the curtain. History and reality are manipulated and gives soaring number of women's emancipation but closes eyes on the sufferings they are facing. The picture is very different in rural, semi-urban, backward areas. History records history from above class, but only literature records history from below; the truth. Many Feminists volubly and strongly made their view point against male dominance and patriarchy. Among

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them was Simone De Beauvoir who in his, *The Second Sex*, philosophized about the females in society who are always referred to as the opposite sex. De Beauvoir calls the 'other' the minority, the least favoured. She says, "We open factories, the offices, the facilities to women, but we continue to hold that marriage is for her the most honourable career freeing from the collective life."

Gendered Subaltern as a Theme in Devi's *Draupadi*

Subaltern is a term first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, women and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who translated Devi's works, uses this term, and elaborates the problems of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situation of gendered subjects and of Indian women in particular. Spivak in her path breaking essay '*Can the Subaltern Speak*' concludes that the subaltern do not have a voice of their own and so they cannot speak but in her translation of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* she gives the gendered subaltern a voice to speak. Devi in her works focuses on gendered subaltern and makes breast a symbol and Spivak states in the *Introduction to the Breast Stories*:

The breast is not a symbol in all her stories. In 'Draupadi', what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence begins to waver. (Spivak, vii)

By comparing the breast symbol with the historical names of the protagonists in her short stories, she ardently brings out the cruel sufferings of the gendered subaltern. In *Draupadi* story of a tribal woman being tortured and raped by police officials she points out through careful selection of words the misery that the subaltern woman have to face by the (un)armed men.

Slowly the bloodied nail heads 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?

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi has passed out.

She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head,

the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making he 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.

Then morning comes.

Then Draupadi Mejhén is brought to the tent and thrown on the straw.

Her piece of cloth is thrown over her body.

Then, after breakfast, after reading the newspaper and sending the radio message 'Draupadi Mejhén apprehended,' etc., Draupadi Mejhén is ordered brought in. Suddenly there is trouble.

Draupadi sits up as soon as she hears 'Move!' and asks, Where do you want me to go? To the Burra Sahib's tent.

Where is the tent? Over there.

Draupadi fixes her red eyes on the tent. Says, Come, I'll go.

The guard pushes the water pot forward.

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, she's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior.

The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind.

What is this? He is about to cry, but stops.

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

What is this? He is about to bark.

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Draupadi Mejhén. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?

Where are her clothes?

Won't put them on, Sir. Tearing them.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, 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. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me—come on, kounter 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." (Devi, 35-37)

These lines as quoted from the text represented a woman as an object to exercise muscle power. No matter what the circumstances are she is always seen as an object of desire, a thing to win over. She is gang raped in a single night by army men. On a metaphorical level this story is a satire on *Mahabharat's* Draupadi. Firstly, in those times, too, a woman was seen nothing more than a female body, a thing so personal so as to put her on stake. Nothing has changed off time. Secondly, where the Draupadi of Mahabharata was saved By Lord Krishna, there is no such Lord in contemporary India who could come and save Devi's *Dopdi*, she is raped incessantly and even while she is bleeding she continues to serve the hungry dogs of the army. While the next morning they try to cover up their own acts by clothing her Dopdi refuses to put on clothes, this act by the army personnel shows the hypocritical nature of men and society at large. They visualize women, materialize her, objectify her but are deceitful in society. "It would be a mistake to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power- could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction." (Spivak, 12)

Padmapriya as an Epitome of Resistance

Goswami's *The Game of Bhairavi* is taken from the short story collection, *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya*. It marks a step ahead of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* in terms of exploring the dynamics of symbolic cannibalism. The predominant motif here is that of woman as food. Goswami illustrates how symbolic cannibalism has become an institutionalized way of life and how the behaviour this generates is perceived and socially sanctioned as normal human behaviour. The presentation of cannibalism as the prevailing social ethos "exposes the disturbing foundation of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only finely camouflaged as civilization." (Parker, 1995: 364)

Under the Shadow of Kamakhya develops through a series of contrasting images between red and white. Red suggests the colour of blood, of human and animal sacrifice. The colour of the ring that Aghor Bhagabati gave his son in law is red too. In contrast, Padmapriya is constantly associated with white: all through, she is in search of white flowers to make an offering to the goddess. The spot on her back, which becomes the excuse for her husband to throw her out of his house, is white too.

Moreover, both the leading male characters – Bhubaneswar and Sambhudev, are associated with carnivorous animals.

Men and women hunt each other like prey and symbolically consume each other just as hunters once devoured animals. In the world of *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya*, hunting is no longer necessary and has been outmoded by the hunting of human enemies. The protagonist Padmapriya has been already disowned by her husband Bhubaneswar under the pretext that she is infected with leprosy. Lavanya, Padmapriya's only friend, believes that Bhubaneswar had not even seen her beautiful body; had he seen her beautiful body it would not have been possible for him to throw her out of his house. Therefore, Lavanya repeatedly asks Padmapriya to see and offer herself as a prey for "flesh-eating man".

Indira Goswami deliberately creates a distressing image of women as food and draws a parallel between the way in which human flesh is devoured by man-eaters in the jungle and the way in which women are devoured by men:

Men are like wolves. Once they taste flesh they turn into man-eaters ... Haven't you heard how the man-eater swallows even the blood-soaked clothes of their victims? Human flesh is intoxicating. And the craze for human flesh is even more powerful in humans than it is among animals. (Goswami, 102)

When Padmapriya accuses Lavanya of being shameless, the latter claims that she knows what men want.

Goswami highlights the way women's bodies are devoured in patriarchal societies and then disposed of like waste:

I've heard that these men chew your body like they chew sugarcane. And once they have sucked the last drop out of you, they spit you out. (98)

Most of Indira Goswami's heroines initially appear as victims, and their oppression is laid bare through their relationship with food. Given the patriarchal nature of language and its incapacity to accommodate female experience, it is expected that women choose an alternative, non-verbal form of communication. The failure of language, the inadequacy of words as a mode of communication, is a recurring theme in Indira Goswami's work. *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* highlights the insufficiency of words as a mode of communication at the very beginning when Padmapriya looks out through the window of her dark room and sees a group of pilgrims walking up towards the temple. The group of pilgrims contains three old men and two old women along with a few children. The stooping posture of the old as they climb up makes the narrator compare them to a flock of storks. The stork is a unique bird in the sense that it has no syrinx. It is a mute bird, and can give no bird call. Padmapriya is as mute as a stork. While this constitutes an indisputable symbol of powerlessness, Goswami illustrates how women can use their bodies as objects of resistance against the system of oppression designed to control those bodies.

Lavanya's presentation of Padmapriya as food makes the latter seem a symbol of powerlessness, but Padmapriya also uses the image of her body as food in a subversive manner. Even as she capitulates to the image of herself as food and the control this represents, she finds a way of subverting that control. What is a form of control and degradation becomes a form of power.

Goswami makes the protagonist Padmapriya turn upside down the traditional power equations of gender by presenting her as someone who plays the role of the willing victim of her husband's cannibalistic desire to take her revenge upon him for the wrongs that he had committed against her. Two years after being deserted by her husband, she comes across him in a marriage in the neighbourhood. Lavanya makes plans for the meeting between Bhubaneswar and Padmapriya in the backyard. The images at this moment are sensuous and are of symbolic value. As Padmapriya waits for Bhubaneswar, she sees the hide of a goat which was killed for the marriage-feast being spread on the ground. It is a moonlit night and the moon is compared to the exposed breast of a young girl who had just taken a bath in the Brahmaputra. Lavanya advises Padmapriya for the one last time before she meets Bhubaneswar:

“Don't use words. Try to speak with your body. When a young girl speaks to her lover in this way all his pride, anger, rage, everything disappears. The tiger gets transformed into the sheep” (122)

Throughout the novel Lavanya does the talking for Padmapriya who is almost like her alter-ego. Lavanya only restates what Padmapriya had already decided to do. In fact, a little while before this encounter with Bhubaneswar, she asks Sambhudev, the man who sacrifices animals in the temple:

“Sir, I want to offer my own blood, I want to worship the Devi with my own blood. I have only two desires, two ambitions” (113)

Sambhudev of course advises her against making an offering of her blood because she is a Brahmin. Meanwhile, Bhubaneswar and Lavanya rush down the steps to meet Padmapriya in the backyard “like some predatory animals attacking a prey” (112). Bhubaneswar tries to move away from Padmapriya but she grabs hold of his hand, places it on her breast and starts crying. Then, to the surprise of Bhubaneswar, she takes off her innerwear to show the white spot on her back that was taken for leprosy. At this moment the third-person narrator comments:

The bright moonlight and the soft glow of the earthen lamps transformed her skin to molten gold, which gleamed and shifted magically before his eyes...(123)

They pass the entire night in the backyard as Bhubaneswar gladly walks into the “trap” set by Padmapriya. From this moment on, Bhubaneswar's sleeping desire is revived and he starts frequenting the house of Aghora Bhagawati, his father-in-law. Very soon he is accompanied by his friends on his regular visits to Padmapriya's house. A few days later it is discovered that Padmapriya is pregnant

and Bhubaneswar makes a public confession that the child is his. In the final scene of the novella, Padmapriya does a bold confession to Bhubaneswar that the child's father is none other than Sambhudev.

“The child isn't yours”

“What?”

“This child isn't yours.”

He swooped upon her, and grabbing her shoulders, shook her violently.

Whose is it? Then whose is it?”

The child's father is Sambhudev.”

“Sambhudev!!”

...Bhubaneswar collapsed in a heap on the floor. (128)

Thus, Padmapriya proves that a woman cannot be taken for granted. She avenges her husband by claiming that the child in her womb is not his. Initially she compares herself with animals and men with predators, but eventually she gains the power to question and made him realise that she is omnipotent in her own world. Padmapriya is a rarest of rare woman protagonist who has shaken the orthodox patriarchal tradition that has been laid centuries ago.

She saw the look on the faces of the men preparing the buffalo for sacrifice.

The buffalo was lying sprawled on the ground. Its hooves and horns were tied to the ground, tied to little pegs in the ground. Some of the men were pouring pitcher after pitcher of water on the buffalo's neck to soften it for the knife's stroke. She felt a sharp pang of sympathy for the struggling animal, its horns bound, hooves secured, the poor helpless creature. (117)

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the voice of the subaltern women who have made their body as a weapon to fight back the atrocities done on them. Dopdi is a tribal by birth, Padmapriya is a Brahmin, yet they have faced the similar kind of marginalisation in the society since they both come under the common stand—the women, the marginalised, the underprivileged, the downtrodden. No matter, whatever the class and community they belong to, their sufferings remain the same. Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami have refused to follow street and state censors and succeeded in bringing the unheard voice to the fore. Women characters of Devi and Goswami are similar in their protest against patriarchy. They are strong and bold. They wanted to expose the beastly nature of men. Senanayak and Bhubaneswar are chauvinists who want to exercise their power over women. In story after story the writer-activists turn their searching gaze into the dark and sombre backyards of Indian life almost as an obsessive act of exploration and expiation. Even after so

many years of independence, the marginal are deprived of their basic rights. Through their novels, stories and a number of articles, they have exposed the feudal system which is anti-tribal, anti-women, anti-poor and anti-tiller. The major concern of the writers is the sufferings of the marginalised women who were denied justice and bound to be the victims of patriarchy.

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