

Asian Resonance

Praxis of Identity Politics in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"



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Abstract

Though "human identities and subjectivities are shifting and fragmentary" (Loomba 238), the identity of nation, race and gender depends on the politics of the main stream and the phallogocentric or patriarchal society. "This was patriarchal voice, the voice of the dominant proprietary body speaking against the rights of non-proprietary, females and lower castes" (Bhattacharya 47).

Spivak writes, "If there is a buzzword in cultural critique now, it is marginality" (Spivak 55). Discourses of marginality such as race, gender, psychological 'normalcy', geographical and social distance, and political exclusion, intersect in a view of reality which supersedes the geometric distinction of centre and margin and replaces it with a sense of complex, interweaving, and synergetic accretion of experience. It will be clear by now that such questions are not unique to the study of colonialism but are also crucial for any scholarship concerned with recovering the histories and perspectives of marginalized people- be they women, non-whites, non- Europeans, the lower classes and oppressed castes- and for any consideration of how ideologies work and are transformed.

If literature is the depiction of relations between the inner and outer selves, between individuals and society, and if literary criticism is the attempt to analyse these relations in terms of language, "Feminist criticism is concerned both with the representation of women in literature and with changing women's position in society by freeing them from oppressive restraints" (Peck 184).

The study of history has begun to include women's history (her story), a discipline which strives to unveil women's lives and achievements, to acknowledge the contributions of women as scholars, researchers and writers. Every historical period and literary realm is under-going reassessment from a feminist perspective: from life in the Middle Ages to contemporary science fiction; from modern media images to romantic fiction. (Kenyon 1)

Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi" tells the story of a Naxalite Santal tribal woman named Dopdi Mejhen. Dopdi is tortured and raped. The morning after the rape, she refuses to clothe and wash herself. Her nakedness becomes an affront to the masculinity of the attackers: " 'What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again?.....There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of,' she asserts".(Sen-p.244)

Rape, in a patriarchal society, is synonymous with the power of manhood. On the other hand, the 'rapability' of the woman's body is because it is believed that a woman's honour lies in her inviolate body. A major point of contrast between the heroine of this story as opposed to the protagonists in the western texts who belong to the genteel world or even the middle class milieu, is the Draupadi, an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Her being a tribal means that she is not considered a part of mainstream Indian society. Apart from the tribal question, Mahasweta Devi is also concerned with the issues of women's identity. Here, the central focus is on how the identity of a race and gender depends on the politics of the main stream and how politics and practice of empire determine Other's identity.

Keywords: Feminism, Politics and identity

Introduction

Though "human identities and subjectivities are shifting and fragmentary" (Loomba 238), the identity of nation, race and gender depends on the politics of the main stream and the phallogocentric or patriarchal society. "This was patriarchal voice, the voice of the dominant proprietary body speaking against the rights of non-proprietary, females and lower castes" (Bhattacharya 47).

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Identity politics is a broad term which does not refer to a single unified movement and is used to cover a great variety of political and social concepts and campaigns. The issue of equal rights for women became prominent during the American and French Revolutions in the late 18th century. Mary Woolstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* which was published in 1792, inaugurated a new realm in the world of feminism. In Britain, however, it did not flourish until the emergence of Suffragette Movement in the late 19th century. With the emergence of this movement there was a significant political change where women finally gained the right to vote in 1918.

The question of what constitutes feminist writing is a contentious issue, but what is certain is that short stories or novels concerned with women's experience represent a significant section of the contemporary fiction market, and make rich use of innovations in narrative technique and of a range of styles and genres. An important division among Feminist Critics is between those, such as Showalter,

who see the role of contemporary female writing as that of self discovery, articulating the nature of women's personal experience within society and revealing structures of oppression, and those such as Toril Moi who advocate rather the deconstruction of the idea of the unitary self, and the rejection of the male-female dichotomy in favour of some ideal of androgyny.

Feminist critics include a great variety of practices and is itself constantly developing and changing, so it probably makes more sense to speak of feminist criticisms in the plural rather than the singular.

Female critics, because of their personal experience of the working of patriarchy, are arguably better equipped to bring to light and analyze such typically female pre-occupations. The black poets and writers note with protest that white women focus upon their oppression and ignore differences of race, sexual presence, class, age. There is pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word: sisterhood that does not in fact exist.

In such context bell hook's (nee Gloria Watkins) acclaimed *Ain't I a Woman ? Black Women and Feminism* (1918) more and more groups of women- African-American, Chicana and Lesbian women- began to arrest an identity of their own and to create separate feminist literary traditions. Bertha Smith had in 1977 already taken that initiative with regard to black female writing, arguing that writers like Zora N. Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison presented black women with their folk memories, their special skills, and their intimacy with the natural world, were clearly distinct from white women. As a result of these developments, American feminism and feminist literary studies that it had produced began to fragment along lines of ethnic and sexual identity, while its liberalist perspective also was submitted to severe critiquing.

Abandoning the ideas of Pan- African cultural identity found in African communities in America critics have emphasized the specific identity of all the various 'black' literatures. Writers such as the Barbadian Brathwaite, using the term 'creolization' have argued that black, white, Indian, Chinese cultures have created, in a continuous process, a Caribbean identity. In 1960s, in the spirit of negritude, a black aesthetic was evolving. The heroine of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* ends a successful entrepreneur, stays within an individualist, capitalist framework, and is therefore, not fully liberated. The critics opine that breaking free from the patriarchal prison that is her home when the novel begins, she creates her own household, yet radical politics or collective struggle against racism or sexism do not inform her struggle for self-actualization.

In the short story- "Draupadi" Mahasweta Devi, one of the most dignified Post-Colonial writer, fixes her gaze on that part of society which is called the voiceless section of Indian society- which is not only illiterate and uneducated but also separated from the mainstream of the society. In her short story Mahasweta Devi tries to portray the life of the

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voiceless and marginalised men and particularly women of the downtrodden and tribal society who only know how to struggle for their existence where till today the tribals have had no justice and where they are more deeply in shadow. She vividly represents the ideological moorings which inspire her characters in their struggle.

She sketches the story of an illiterate and uneducated tribal widow- Dopdi Mejhen. She is tortured and raped. The morning after she becomes victim, she refuses to clothe and wash herself. Her nakedness becomes an affront to the masculinity of the attackers: "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again?.....There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of," she asserts.(Sen-p.244)

Rape, in a phallogocentric society, is identified with the authority of 'manhood'. On the other hand, the 'rapability' of the woman's body is because it is believed that a woman's honour lies in her unaltered body. A major point of contrast between the heroine of this story as opposed to the protagonists in the western texts who belong to the refined world or even the middle class environment, is Draupadi, an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Her being a tribal means that she is not considered a part of mainstream Indian society as she belongs to lower strata of society. She is marginalized by tripple forces- Government, her own society and upper class women.

The form of struggle for their existence with them is not personal but collective. Women's problems are different. Unlike Desai's female characters, Mahasweta's women do not suffer any sense of alienation. Their struggle is for primary and basic needs of life. Therefore they don't have leisure to nourish dreams of a privileged existence nor can they meditate on psychological issues, rather they fill the need to organise a larger struggle for meaningful existence. The story illustrates the fact that women should pioneer the fight for dignity and empowerment and that unitedly. Only through collective struggle against mainstream social forces women's issues may be resolved. Women of the 'have-not' class understand that female issues can not be fought in isolation.

Evil is in society. Evil is in the mind. A text means not what it says but what it does not. In Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" absence becomes more powerful than presence. Her stories are understandable only within the framework of social reality. Her texts say what they (texts) do not say – gaps, cracks, sites- are beyond the control of the texts but contribute to the meaning. The focus is on what the texts repress.

Dopdi is the 'other' in as much as she is not contained within the structures of class and gender and ventures beyond. Hers is the most politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Mahasweta Devi has pointed out that the status and respect of women in tribal society is far superior than that of women in manistream Hindu

Society. They are treated as equals. Dopdi Mejhen is fighting shoulder to shoulder with her husband. It is in the third part that she provoked to fight male oppression singly.

The use of white cloth which is visually contrasted with Draupadi's black body symbolises purity and innocence. It demonstrates her efforts to come forward and be a part of the mainstream. Dopdi's status is equivalent to a man's in tribal society. She is a courier or messenger, and not a comrade in the strict sense. She has no specific gender. She is re-mytholised myth.

In a poem entitled "Deceptions" the poet Philip Larkin argues that a raped girl is the less deceived because her suffering is imposed on her; by contrast, the rapist is a victim of the universal illusion that desires can be gratified. He also suffers- 'stumbles'- not knowing the cause of his suffering. Larkin says that he is more deceived.

"This was a patriarchal voice. The voice of the dominant proprietary body speaking against the rights of non-proprietary, females and lower castes"(Bhattacharya 47). The histories and perspectives of marginalised people - be they women, non-whites, non-Europeans, the lower classes and oppressed castes- and for any consideration of how ideologies work and are transformed are crucial to show that the identity of a race and gender depends on the politics of the main stream and how politics and practice of empire determine Other's identity.

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