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Archetypal Deconstruction in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Abstract:

This paper tries to review and reassess the archetypal representation of the tribal woman in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" with special reference to the Ancient Draupadi represented in the great epic *Mahabharata*. It is an attempt to locate the 'Aboriginal woman' question in the context of women's suffering in the past and the present. Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi is an attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct the episode of "Draupadi's Cheelharan by Duryodhan" from the great epic *Mahabharata*. This paper aims at analyzing the myth and presenting how archetypes are used as a significant tool of recasting the past tradition and creating a history for women, as an act of survival.

Keywords: Aboriginal, archetypes, marginalization, oppression, patriarchy, subaltern.

"Literature is, by its very nature, intensely allusive: its classics or models, once recognized as such, echo and re-echo through all subsequent ages" - Northrope Frye (41)

Generally speaking, archetypes are the symbols, images, characters and stories recurring again and again in the works of literature, and are therefore transformed into collective prototypes. As per M. H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

The term archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs of action, character types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myth, dreams, and even social rituals. Such recurrent items are usually held to be the result of elemental and universal patterns in the human psyche whose embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the attentive reader, because he or she shares the psychic archetypes expressed by the author. (23)

These original images carry certain meanings related with human existence. As Northrop Frye in an article "The Developing Imagination" says

the arts, including literature, are not so much concerned with the world as it is: their concern is with the world that man is trying to build out of nature, and imagination they appeal to is a constructive power, which is neither reason nor emotion, though including elements of both.(34)

Literature is the amalgamation of imagination and reality. It tries to portray reality of the human life and existence. It endeavors to find solutions to the universal questions related with human being and those solutions carry certain human experiences. It co-relates different human experiences with one another by using the device of myth. Myth embodies human experiences

and all experiences are common, and hence shared with one another. Looking at the images and patterns a poem, play, or novel has in common with other poems, plays, or novels trying to show that common images and patterns in literature are a reflection of a total human experience.

“Literature is allusive, and seems to radiate from a center. Literature develops out of, or is preceded by body of myths, legends, folk tales, which are transmitted by are earlier classics” (Frye 44). These tales are metanarrative of ancient history and brings up the multiple interpretations of human experiences. It enables reader to understand these myths by answering certain questions and communicating certain meaning. The Swiss Psychologist Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) used the term ‘archetype’ to what he called up ‘primordial images,’ ‘the psychic residue’ of repeated patterns of experiences of ancestors which survives in the ‘collective unconscious’ of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams etc as well as in the works of literature.

Myth can be understood as a story or a complex of story elements, expressing the deeper aspects of the human experience and as a perspective, which is an activity of the mind that synthesizes received knowledge. They are reflections of deep reality and reveal the greatest truth (archetypal criticism is the study of these myths, stories, and symbols). Archetypal literary criticism has been used in Maud Bodkin’s *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934). The other important practitioners of archetypal criticism are Leslie Fiedler, Francis Fergusson, Richard Chase, Philip Wheelwright, and Wilson Knight. The myth critics try to discover, the reality in certain works of literature, which helps the reader to give recurrent response. A mythological approach also known as archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evokes basically the same response in all people. According to the psychologist Carl Jung, mankind possesses a “collective unconscious” that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics categorize these classical patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They consider that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power. This approach emphasizes “the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works” and combines the insights from history, sociology, anthropology psychology and religion.

The proposed paper aims at examining and analyzing the archetypes that the writer has drawn forward in her work in such a way the same emotional response are seen in the reader. Myth may not represent the true reality of life but have a deep reality in it. As Mark Schorer says in *William Blake: The politics of vision*, “myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.” (qtd. in Guerin et al. 183). The paper, persistently attempts to analysis and reassess the tribal situation with special reference to the tribal woman Dopdi Mehjen and its comparison with the archetypal woman that is Draupadi in the great epic *Mahabharata*.

Mahasweta Devi is a middle class Bengali, activist writer and a journalist. She has made contributions to literary and cultural studies in India. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak has translated her works in English. In her works, Mahasweta Devi addresses and interrogates the intersection of vital contemporary issues of politics, gender and class, and this is precisely what makes her a glaring figure in the field of socially committed literature. Her wide ranging works encompass novels like *Hajar Chaurahir Maa- Mother of 1084*, *Aranya Adhikar- The Right of forest*; short fictions, children stories, plays and activist prose writings. Her powerful, haunting tales of

exploitation and the struggle have been seen rich sides of feminist discourse by leading scholars. In Bengal, Mahasweta Devi has voiced and represented the trials and tribulations of the downtrodden tribal. In some short stories, she has profoundly portrayed the haunting experiences of Dalit women, the plight of her survival. She also reveals the dark face of so-called civilized society through a narration of the untold sufferings of a tribal woman. As a social activist, she has spent many years crusading for the rights of Dalit. She is awarded with the Jnanpith Award (India's highest literary award) in 1996, and the Magsaysay Award, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, in 1997. Since Mahasweta is an obsessive activist and writing come to her as an instrument in her battle against exploitation, and marginalization of tribal. She challenges the patriarchal government in family and community.

In her short story "Draupadi" (first appeared in *Agni Garbha* (Womb of Fires) a collection of loosely connected short narratives) Mahasweta Devi ventured to write an episode from the great epic *Mahabharata* and as a feminist response to the myth of Draupadi (the icon of womanhood in Hindu mythology) to the fore, a re-invented cultural history that deconstructs the representation of women, cultures, images, stereotypes and archetypes. The politics of interpretation has most often been the politics of gender.

"Draupadi" is a story of Dopdi Majhen; it is a story of victimization of a woman who dares to confront the oppressive system. It narrates the predicament of a tribal woman caught between the pulls of subsistence living and the appropriatory logic of feudalistic-modernist patriarchal state and its allied system. Dopdi Majhen, a naxalites informer-activist, is a Santhal. She, along with her husband Dulna, had rebelled against the oppressive state –feudal nexus. In the time of drought, Surja Sahu – the feudal kingpin of the area in connivance with the state - had got two tube wells and three wells dug within the compound of his two houses. When the whole Birbhum was reeling under famine, he and his class refused to let tribals share their 'unlimited' water sources. This instigated the rage of the suffering tribals and led them to join the naxalites group, headed by Arijit, and culminated in the 'revenge- killing' of Surja Sahu and his sons. In the aftermath of this killing, and consequent upon the brutal and indiscriminate manhunt launched by the state through 'Operation Bakuli' Dopdi and Dulna were forced to flee and live the life of fugitives. Working in different guises with different landowners in and around Jharkhani belt, they, completely sacrificing their family and desires, dedicated themselves to the cause of movement and the social utopia and economic freedom it promised. They kept on informing their comrades about the movement of the army. Their dedication and their ability to survive created a terror among moneylenders, landlords, grain brokers etc. In order to suppress the Naxalite movement and contain the deviance inherent in it, the state launches 'Operation Jharkhani', initially under Arjan Singh and then under Senanayak, "a specialist in combat and extreme left politics"(393). Dulna, who could not survive this dastardly onslaught/hunt, fails to match Senanayak's cunning. Betrayed by his people, he was entrapped while drinking water and 'countered'. Since then, Dopdi Majhen is on the 'most wanted' list of the police and is living life anonymously. It is at this stage that the story begins. So far she has proved a match for Senanayak's cunning and has, so far, eluded his grasp.

The force of the story lies in its grounding in the Hindu mythology of gender subaltern's body, the female body which is never questioned and only exploited. The body of Draupadi figures forth the unutterable ugliness and cruelty as she articulates a truth, speaks of her true situation, the relationship between the tribal and classical character of Draupadi.

In 1970, the hostility between east and West Pakistan assumed the form of an armed struggle. Rejoicing at the general atmosphere of mirth at the defeat of North Pakistan (India's principal national rival in South Asia) India manage to suppress naxalities that destroyed the rebellious group of the rural population tribal. The year 1971 therefore is the point of reference in the story.

Draupadi is represented before us, between two versions of name Dopdi (tribal name) and Draupadi (classical ancient name). The tribalized form Dopdi is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi. At the close of the story, she becomes the object of her feelings, instead of simply being viewed as the 'other' portrayed as the object of male desires and fears.

In the epic world, Mahasweta Devi endorses her woman characters with the freedom of speech. Remarkably enough, she writes an episode from Mahabharata, amore heterogeneous text then Ramayana. In epic, Draupadi serves a single incident of polyandry, a lesser known marriage system in India. She is the wife of the five sons of impotent Pandu. In the patriarchal and patronymic context of the epic world, Draupadi becomes singular and her husbands are pluralized. The story questions this singularity because Dopdi is placed first as a comrade activist monogamous marriage and later in a situation of multiple rapes. The classical character of Draupadi is used as a form to prepare the ground of heroic deeds. Her legitimized pluralization as a wife amongst her husbands is emphasized to highlight male glory: she becomes the cause of crucial battle. Her eldest husband Yudhistir is at the verge of losing her in the game of dice, when the enemy chief Duryodhana makes an effort to pull at Draupadi's saree. She prays to Lord Krishna and as a divine miracle one sees her to be infinitely clothed and she cannot be publicly stripped off.

Mahasweta Devi in her way to rewrite this episode has attempted to, the deconstruction and the reconstruction of the mythic figure of Draupadi, as a tribal Dopdi was not entitled a heroic name, this pious name was given to her by the Brahmin mistress. The aboriginal Dopdi's name signifies the mark of her distance from the top. In her derivation of Dopdi from Draupadi, Devi has made an implicit point of view. One may find a clear contrast between the classical Draupadi and her. In the earlier case the intervention of God prevented male lust from unclothing her. On the contrary the tribal Dopdi is gang raped by police refuses to be clothed by men in office.

The story opens with the discussion between two medallion uniforms:

What is this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name? ...Draupadi Mehjen. Born the year her mother threshed rice at Surja Sahu (killed)'s at Bakuli. Surja Sahu's wife gave her the name. (Spivak 392)

Dopdi is on the list of wanted persons, yet her name is not on the list of appropriate names for the tribal women. The entire action of the story revolves around the search for Dopdi until she is apprehended. The last disastrous scene finds her in a situation when she becomes hapless victim of the most atrocious male violence on a woman.

Surprisingly enough one may detect that the reinvented Draupadi emerges as a heroic figure. The tribal Dopdi allows men to strip her of as this has been shown as the result of political punishment:

Draupadi Mehjen was apprehended at 6:53 p.m. It took an hour to get her to *camp*, questioning another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8:57 p.m. Senanayaks dinner hour approached and saying, “make her. *Do the needful*,” he disappeared... 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? ...then Draupadi Mehjen is brought to the tent and thrown on the straw. Her piece of cloth is thrown over on her body. (401)

At this point in the story we suddenly come across a completely transformed Dopdi. We are taken aback as when she hears move! She burst into asking:

Where do you want me to go? ... Draupadi fixes her eyes on the tent. Says, Come I'll go ... Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. (401-402)

Senanayak is bewildered and obstruct to see her “Naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high” (402). As she comes closer, laughs and says- “The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?” (402) she palpably refuses to put on cloths and say's “what's the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (402)

Here, Mahasweta Devi insists and emphasizes that at this point of the story the male leadership stops and Dopdi ceases to exist as subaltern. After undergoing the trauma of the worst that could happen to a woman she musters up the courage to speak if not for herself at least for her comrades. It seems as if Dopdi dies in her and freaks like a new Dopdi is born out of the ashes. She protests the entire hungry phallus society and contemptuously asks “what more can you do? Come on, *counter* me- come on, *counter* me-?”(402) In spite of using the word ‘encounter’ she ask them to ‘counter her’ and her ignorant and indigenous way she uses English language correctly even without knowing it. She challenges her politico sexual enemy Senanayak to encounter her.

Quite surprisingly Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breast and for the first time Senanayak ‘is afraid to stand before an unarmed target terribly afraid.’ It is ironical to know that Senanayak who at the beginning of the story gave order to make up Dopdi, finds himself badly afraid at the sight of Draupadi's Crude female sexuality. This is how Draupadi, the subaltern and the most exploited tribal woman represent her woman.

Mahasweta Devi Draupadi is a metanarrative, capturing the life and times of its protagonist Dopdi, a Santhal tribal, at the intersection of modern developmental state and subsistent subaltern survival. It raises the issues of class, caste and colonialism, and their collusion in the formation of hegemonic patriarchal nation state and how this mainstream formation maintains itself through violent ‘othering’ of the margins. Negotiating various ideological locations – the cultural pressures of her won community, the exigencies of naxalites

activism, and the onslaught of army/state – Draupadi/Dopdi encapsulates the gendered nature of the process of othering, i.e., how the mainstream-margin antagonism uses the female body/sexuality as a site of honour/dishonour to vindicate patriarchy, its values and norms. Mahasweta defines her *modus operandi* thus: “It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present times and following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies epic and ‘puranas’ interesting, I use them with new interpretations” (qtd in. Rohtak 166) Mahasweta, as is evident from Dopdi’s transcendence from the sense of bodily shame and her ultimate defiance of Senanayak, uses Dopdi as a trope with rebellious overtones. The author transforms the mythological into a tribal Dopdi, the agent of a potential unmaking of gender and class containment. Draupadi questions this by placing Dopdi first in a comradely activist’s monogamous marriage and then in a situations of multiple rape.

The story of Dopdi reminds one of Draupadi in Mahabharata where Duryodhan successfully stripped Draupadi in the Rajyasabha (King’s council).it is the representation of male stripping female (Dopdi) for their own cause. It is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law.

“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 her 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.” (401)

As a tribal, Dopdi is not romanticized by the author. Dopdi is not like ancient Draupadi-written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power. There is nothing ‘historically implausible’ about Dopdi’s attitudes. She emerges as the most powerful ‘subject’ who, still using the language of sexual ‘honour’, can derisively call herself “the object of your search” (402) whom the author can described as a scary object- “an unarmed target?” (402). An allegory of the woman’s duel against patriarchy in contemporary period is seen which is comparatively different from the historical instant. The central character, a tribal woman called Draupadi, is named, constructed, displaced and silenced. The archetypal Draupadi has been relegated to the position of margin and the tribal Draupadi occupies the position of centre by challenging the male society to cover her up by clothes. Hence the literature embodies the archetypes of essential and universal human experiences. Over the ages diverse images and symbols have developed that convey these experiences. Mahasweta Devi has placed her text within the framework of myths in order to provide it with a framework of meaning that is Draupadi stands as an archetype of suffering woman.

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