

Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi" and Kamala Das's "Kalyani" : Feminist Perspectives

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A comparative study of "Draupadi" and "Kalyani" as stories of exploitation of the female by the male must acknowledge some basic factors in the creative and historical worlds of Mahashweta Devi and Kamala Das. The former is from Western part of India West Bengal and the latter is from Southern part of India Kerala region wise. Although the arena of a woman's experience is universal, Devi and Das enter into artistic creativity from widely differing cultures which have been afflicted by similar realities. Nevertheless Devi and Das share a fundamental sensitivity regarding the problems of the oppressed women. It is the intensity and nature of their commitment to the cause of women who are victimized by society that regulates the form of everything they have said or written.

Mahashweta Devi, the renowned Bengali writer uses her writing as a weapon to fight against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination of all sorts. She makes an effort to reflect the injustice, disparities that exist between the Elite, Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. It is well-known that Mahashweta Devi's ideological commitment leans toward Marxism. A Marxist Writer consciously lures the interest of the reader toward the disparities that are there in the society through their Writing. There are numerous writers who have depicted such inequalities in society – to quote a few, Maxim Gorky, Ngugi Wa´Thiang´o, Chinua Achebe, Mulk Raj Anand, Wole Soyinka.

In India, the problem of social injustice is much more because of the pernicious and more dangerous caste system. The offshoot of the perpetuation of the problem of caste led to the origin of Dalit literature. Many Dalits all over the country under the influence of Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule claimed social justice in their Writing. They protested against the practice of Untouchability, Exploitation, Oppression based on caste and used literature as a weapon to complete their mission. The element of protest and fight against evils in society is not new to Bengali literature. The Bengali intellectuals were the first to receive the modern progressive ideas from the West. The Renaissance entered India through Bengal. The well-known Bengali writers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Madusudan Dutt, Saratchandra, Anupama Devi protested against the prevalent social evils in the society not only in their writing but also in their public speeches. As H.A. Singh says:

The sense of protest usually springs from an extreme sensitiveness to the disparity between ideals and practices. They fight a fierce battle with the

cruel systems that deny life to others and rise in revolt against the exploiters and a hostile social environment that belittles the exploited (13).

Mahashweta Devi belongs to the group of writers who have been incessantly striving for the welfare of the tribals, bonded labourers, sharecroppers and other marginalized communities. She is not only a writer but an activist, playwright, columnist, magazine editor and essayist.

Most of the writings of Mahashweta Devi are set in the context of the Post – Independent Indian scenario. Born in pre-independent India, she has been a witness to numerous developments that have occurred before and after independence. She is especially fond of portraying the problems of the tribals in the Indian villages, their exploitation by the landlords and money lenders. She champions the noble cause of exposing the atrocities perpetrated by the corrupt officials, police, government contractors so on and so forth.

Regarding her commitment to writing, Devi says:

I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake. Since I haven't ever learnt to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation (36).

It is against this backdrop that I would like to examine Mahashweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" – an important character in the *Mahabharata* who was married to five husbands by accident and disrobed by the Kauravas that became a slur on the manhood of her wedded husbands – the Pandavas. Mahashweta Devi gives a new twist to this story, a modern interpretation. The story is taken from her collection of stories called *Breast stories* which includes "Draupadi", "Breast Giver" and "Behind the Bodies".

The protagonist of the story is Dopdi and this is how the story begins:

Name Dopdi Majhi, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile cherakhan, Bankrahjarh, Scar on the shoulder (dopdi was shot), information whether dead or alive and / or assistance in arrest: one hundred rupees... (1).

Dopdi and her husband Dulna were suspected as the main culprits in the famous 'Operation Bakuli' when three villages were cordoned off and machine gunned. They had gone underground for a long time in a "Neanderthal darkness", as they were suspected to be the chief instigators in the murder of the landlord of the village Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper caste wells and tube wells during the drought.

Thus the study is a serious critique on the socio-economic values that exist in our society. Mahashweta Devi points out the exploitative social system that is discriminatory and oppressive toward the weak both physically and economically through the imagery of the 'breast'. The breast becomes an object of torture, revenge and exploitation of class, caste and gender.

Dopdi Majhi, the tribal revolutionary, the most notorious female becomes a nightmare to Captain Arjun Singh, the architect of the 'Operation Bakuli' followed by 'Operation Forest Jharkhani'. He is forced to take up voluntary retirement as he could

not endure the dreadful fear of the black skinned tribals. The Senanayak who assumes charge of the operation against the tribal insurgency kills Dulna, Dopdi's husband when he was drinking water from the river. Dulna's corpse is used as a bait to capture Dopdi and other tribal youth but they refuse to be trapped. In a treacherous, cunning and abominable way the Senanayak captures Dopdi with the help of the native betrayers Shomai and Budhna. She was undressed, gang raped, breasts and nipples torn off and when she was asked to put on the cloth, she refuses to do so thereby challenging the male audacity that it was not so easy to cloth her as they had stripped her so unashamedly. She says;

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man?... 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 - ? (23).

While uttering these unexpected tirade of words, Draupadi pushes the Senanayak with her mangled breasts. He is extremely apprehensive to stand before an unarmed target for the first time in his life. Gayathri Spivak says that this story insists on the fact that the male leadership stops at this point. This story as she says "is an allegory of the woman's struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment" (24).

Mahashweta Devi portrays Dopdi in contrast to the romanticized version of Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharata*. In the epic, even though Draupadi had five husbands when she was disrobed none could safeguard her modesty but Lord Krishna who saved her honour by clothing her infinitely. It is not surprising or shocking if Dopdi in this story is mercilessly stripped and gangraped by the police reducing her to the sexual receptacle of the male libido. In both the contexts, man plays a dominant, vicious role of humiliating a hapless woman in a patriarchal society which becomes the prerogative of the male hegemony. As Dopdi had nobody to rescue her she devises an incredible bold way of resistance by refusing to be clothed by the men in the office. When she questions 'are you a man?' and says 'there isn't a man here' she challenges their manliness. Mahashweta Devi has implied that oppression stretched to the extreme end could compel the oppressed to express the extreme possible resistance that makes it difficult and uneasy, uncomfortable, embarrassing for the exploiter of the sex, the abuser of the female body. It is in this context that Simone de Beauvoir needs to be quoted.

When we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the "division" of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form (78).

The Repressive State Apparatus represented by the police in Mahashweta Devi's short story can be compared to the same role played by them in Kamala Das's short story "Kalyani". Both the writers are highly critical about the men in Khaki uniform who misuse power to subjugate women according to their whims and fancies.

In Kamala Das's short story "Kalyani", Ammini- the protagonist of the story is robbed of her identity and christened with a new name by the police in the station called Kalyani which remains enigmatic to her till the end. Though she protests that her real

name is Ammini they do not listen to her and she is arrested by five policemen who represent the five Pandavas unable to save Draupadi. The story begins when Kalyani's car stopped by five policemen for not driving the car properly even though she was driving slowly and correctly according to traffic rules. When she asks one of them about the cause of her arrest, he tells her to submit all her complaints to the person inside who is addressed as 'Master' by him. The master is compared to the modern Duryodhana who insists upon disrobing Draupadi openly in the Assembly of courtesans. The master suddenly starts calling her as Kalyani even though she protests that her name is not Kalyani. He insists upon calling her so depriving her of identity. This incident reminds one of Jean Rhys's classic novel – *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which the protagonist of the novel – Antionette is called as 'Bertha' soon after her marriage by her husband. When she protests – "My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha? he answers : "Because it's a name", I am particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (134).

Identity is deliberately denied to her because, psychologically speaking, her husband tries to indoctrinate her mind that she is someone else. He tries to hypnotize her by asserting that she is Bertha to which Antoinette says that it is also Obeah practice to call someone so. When she says: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know that's Obeah too" (147). Christophme, the maid servant explains that Obeah is spirit theft that can reduce human beings to the state of puppets, dolls or zombis. As slaves had their identity erased with names given by their masters, he tries to hypnotise by calling her as Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antionette by which he casts an incantatory effect on her mind. Christophme recognizes this and accuses him of spirit theft. He controls her speech like a puppet master. He knows that he has destroyed something beyond his experience, something that is out of reach. He loathes her 'Otherness' and reveals himself as a practitioner of colonial Obeah. With the confidence of his belief in his own cultural and racial superiority he steals her spirit and drives her mad as in the classic novel *Jane Eyre* considered as a sequel to *Wide Saragasso Sea*

Ammini is in war with the structures which constitute and execute power. Sexual politics plays a determined and dominant role in Ammini's victimization who is subjected to two kinds of oppression. One is Repressive State Apparatus represented by the police; another is Ideological State Apparatus- the family through which she derives her Individual Identity. She witnesses a final breakdown when her husband abandons her.

The concept of patriarchy fetishized though it may have become a necessary focus on the idea that a woman's oppression is not an isolated misfortune under one man's tyrannical authority. What is more threatening is that she is at the receiving end of an entire system of social structures and practices based on the fascist ideology that men are and should be superior to women.

In Kamala Das's short story too the master tries to rob Ammini of her identity. Ammini implores her so-called husband to the spot but the policemen do not permit her

to do so saying that the crime was committed by her and not her husband. The Master policeman walks in and calls her as Kalyani. He ignores her and pronounces a judgment – ‘three months rigorous imprisonment’. No uniform is given to her and she remains naked. She wakes up to a sound and sees her husband Menon, standing by the door. He complains to her that he never expected such behavior from her and walks away coolly by calling her as ‘harlot’.

Kate Millet in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* argues that this system of domination of one collective group defined by birth over another collective group, also defined by birth is a power-game, a political manoeuvring more universal than any other form of oppression. This system she considers,

tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power (25).

In view of the statement made by Kate Millet quoted above, what binds Mahashweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi” and Kamala Das’s short story “Kalyani” is a shared view of oppression and marginalization. They try to subvert the model role – Draupadi as conceived in our mythology and facilitate redefinition of the female. It is in this process of subverting the female image that both the writers have succeeded in portraying their ability as postmodern feminist writers. Ruthven states that “a literary work should provide role models and instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing whose identities are not dependent on men” (13).

Not surprisingly, the most searching examinations and analyses –though not necessarily the most direct of women’s place, of women’s search for identity have been made by women themselves. As Tagore acknowledges in a review of Sharat Kumari Choudharani’s *Shubha – Bibaba*, “No male writer can write about the women’s story the way the woman has” (qtd. in Dec 4). Women’s discourse may have its “silence, euphemism, or circumlocution, its blanks and gaps and silences, which are not the spaces where female consciousness reveals itself but the blinds of a ‘prison –house of language’” (255).

In both the short stories, women are not wooden and idealistic characters. The duplicity in society, the hypocrisy of the system, the psychological and physical trials of the heroines, the negative role of the community, the bondages of women are all very well mirrored. The rise and fall of women’s voices, nuances which reflect the subtle irony, the suggestive, imagistic, lyrical, emotional, introspective qualities of their discourse are portrayed in an effective manner. Dopdi as well as Ammini are subjected to traumatic psychic experience and are caught in the gradual disintegration of a traditional value system. The external questions posed by the writings of Women Writers could very well be summed up in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

The woman artist enters the caverns of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but the tradition that might have

generated that power. The body of her precursor’s art, and thus the body of her own art, lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it, and become a member of it, join it and rejoin it, integrate it, and in doing so achieve her own integrity, her own selfhood (98).

The ability to construct a new image of woman by deconstructing the myth of Draupadi, by revolting against the system courageously is what makes Mahashweta Devi’s short story more significant than Kamala Das’s short story. One can discern the fierce feminine sensibility in Mahashweta Devi’s story although both the writers become symbols of the oppressed lives that women live in traditional patriarchal societies and more significantly symbols of the feminist protest of such oppression. Both the stories are serious social critiques. In Mahashweta Devi’s short story, there is a re-affirmation of women, woman reclaimed of body and spirit. When Dopdi refuses to be clothed in front of the policemen she seems to be declaring that the identificatory category of ‘woman’ is not necessarily determined by the anatomy with which she is born. Thus feminism has its accent on politics: “It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men is society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (77).

The approaches to Feminism are various; such as Marxist, Existentialist, Radical, Psychoanalytic and Postmodern. But it is the shared view of oppression and marginalization that coheres most of the women’s writing. Feminism in short, is more a concern for women and is meant to establish a new identity for women to understand the female predicament. “It is the task of a woman writer to erase the unrealistic labels and portray the true self of woman; she should join hands with others in changing the traditional images of woman, explode the model role assigned by the patriarchal society, and facilitate re-definition of the female” (85). It is in this process of subverting the female image that Mahashweta Devi and Kamala Das have displayed their ability as feminist writers. Ruthven states that “a literary work should provide role models and instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self actualizing whose identities are not dependent on men” (92).

Mahashweta Devi and Kamala Das as novelists and short story writers have always championed the rights of women. They see themselves as the paradigm of the Indian woman struggling against entrenched social and sexual prejudices. They subvert the female archetypes of womanhood, oppose a fiction of idealized, contended femininity with brute facts of sexual experience and female suffering. In their stories dependent females are always pitted against powerful institutionalized male forces and hence women must resist the trap of false protectionism. Their stories retextualise a key concern, the question of female sexuality as it operates within this shady world. The heroines are caught in the seamless game of seduction and betrayal, logic and unreason.

In Kamala Das’s short story and Mahashweta Devi’s short story, the police Inspector – supposed to be the custodian of society, upholder of human rights, a

representative of Government Institution indulge in the infringement of rights and becomes an instrument of oppression, an evil force. Their use of shorter form creates fiction that is nevertheless more accomplished and frequently brilliant. Their heroines are schooled in suffering and fall into a pattern of social abuse and emotional trauma. The stories written by both the writers are about extremities of human behavior, about women struggling to come to terms with lives hopelessly compromised by events that seem beyond their control.

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