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Deciphering Draupadi: Representations and Recontextualisations

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine representations of Draupadi, a pivotal, intriguing and controversial character in the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata*, part of the epic tradition of poetry that weaves myth and history continues to exert a strong cultural, philosophical and spiritual influence. The galaxy of stories and the general perceptions about the figures such as Draupadi that this epic holds within its ambit remain more or less the same in popular memory. Born out of a sacrificial fire, known for her unfathomable beauty and intelligence, she becomes the wife of the Pandavas- the five great heroes of Bharat; she is lost in a game of dice and has to face an attempt of being disrobed in a royal assembly. Draupadi doesn't accept her humiliation passively, she raises her voice to question and demand justice. She becomes iconic in her resistance and it is this germ of rebellion that gives her continued relevance to be appropriated, accommodated, reclaimed and (re) presented in the modern-day discourse. In the last few decades, the figure of Draupadi has been reinterpreted and recast in a number of narratives which essentially problematise the politics of patriarchal storytelling. This paper focuses on four such works- Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi". The theoretical framework used in the paper includes feminist explorations of representation. Feminism may relatively be a modern development and to read women (or certain representations of women) of the distant past through a feminist lens might be considered an instance of anachronism but the fact that much of contemporary Feminist theory has germinated not only from academic; critical thought but also from the different movements and ground level activism that have and still continue to fight for women's issues is an important precondition of this paper. A part of the article focuses on the idea of Draupadi's ability to transcend specific representations to emerge as hyphenating metaphor between theoretical analysis and praxis.

Keywords: Draupadi, feminism, representation, recontextualisation, theoretical analysis, praxis

"You are looking at the story through the wrong window...you've got to close it and open a different one..." (Divakaruni 15). A myriad of windows have been opened to look at the intriguing character of Draupadi, the controversial heroine of the *Mahabharata*, and as 'a story gains power by retelling' (Divakaruni 20), so has the story of Draupadi attained newer dimensions with every retelling.

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The galaxy of stories and the general perceptions about the heroic figures such as Draupadi that the *Mahabharata* holds within its ambit remain more or less the same in popular memory. Born out of a sacrificial fire, known for her unfathomable beauty and intelligence, Draupadi makes her first appearance in the 'Swayamvara' ceremony held for her. She becomes the wife of the Pandavas – the five great heroes of Bharat. She is lost in a game of dice and has to face an attempt of being disrobed in a royal assembly. She is subjected to public insult and humiliation more than once and constantly finds herself to be the victim of the ire of male lust. Most of the major decisions of her life are thrust upon her by the men in her life – the 'Swayamvara' ceremony is organised in such a way that allows her little freedom to actually choose her husband; a polyandrous marriage is imposed on her and she is gambled away by her husband. However, what makes her unique is that she doesn't refrain from raising her voice to question and demand justice.

"Dhik! Shame on you!
If all these great Kaurava heroes
find nothing wrong here,
then the dharma of the Bharats is dead,
the dharma of the ksatriyas is dead.
Drona, Bhisma mahatma Vidura
And the great raja Dhrtastra
Have lost their greatness- else why
Are they silent on the great adharma?
Tell me, members of this sabha, answer me:
What do you think- have I been won or not won-
Tell me, O lords of the earth?" (Lal 424)

Draupadi does not accept her humiliation passively, her cry for vengeance rings reverberating. She becomes iconic in her resistance.

Ishwar Tripathi in his book *Mahabharatacharcha* refers to the two essays Bankimchandra Chatterjee wrote about Draupadi stating in one of them that whether in Ancient or in Modern writings, the heroines are portrayed in the same mould – a devoted wife, soft-natured, shy, an epitome of tolerance. This is the archetype of Aryan literature. Valmiki created Sita with these traits in mind and since then, the Aryan heroines have been moulded in a similar fashion; famous heroines like Shakuntala, Damyanti, Ratnabali are all imitations of Sita. Chatterjee states 'Aeka Draupadi Sita(r) chaya(o) sporsho koren nai' ('Only Draupadi remains untouched by the influence of Sita's powerful image'). Moreover, Sita has been imitated a million times but Draupadi has never been

replicated (Tripathi 47). Having said that, the question remains – has her character been able to escape the patriarchal mode of storytelling in the text of *Mahabharata*? Perhaps not. She, however, remains one of the most striking women characters of Indian literature , one of the earliest strong female voices to have echoed in the realms of literature- resilient and questioning.

The germ of rebellion that Draupadi's character holds is undeniable. It is this trait that makes her relevant even today and has allowed her to be appropriated and accommodated in the modern-day discourse. In the last few decades, the figure of Draupadi has been recast and reinterpreted in a number of narratives which further problematises the politics of patriarchal storytelling. Traditionally, Draupadi's representation has been pivoted upon her objectification and denial of subjectivity. Popular contemporary revisionist retellings posit and attempt to reclaim Draupadi's subjectivity and lend to her an agency to re-present and reinterpret the narrative built around her. The fluidity of the character, as that of the epic that she is part of, allows her to be transplanted into multiple contexts. "Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival." (Rich 18; Plate 1)

Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* (1967), a collection of essays, originally written in Marathi, adopts a historical and rational approach to study some of the major characters of the *Mahabharata* - Bhishma, Kunti, Gandhari. She contextualises them and attempts to highlight their humane traits, not their venerated demi-god images. The chapter on Draupadi as John Brockington states in the Introduction to the text, "forms the heart of the book in many ways" (Karve xv). Dwelling on the few similarities and the many differences she draws between Draupadi and Sita (Sita is seen as the ideal heroine of a Romance; Draupadi, a very real and complex character of history), Karve examines some controversial concerns related to Draupadi. In completely rejecting the idea that Panchaali was the cause of the war in *Mahabharata,* she makes an important statement, challenging the popular belief. Her reference to a verse in a Purana that calls Sita the 'Kritya' (a demonic female) of Satyayuga and Draupadi as the Kritya of Dvaparyuga, calls out the misogyny of the 'belief' that women cause quarrels that are fought out by men. She rationalises her argument by drawing attention to how the Pandavas were more interested in retrieving their share of the kingdom than in avenging their wife. Moreover, the seeds of the war were sown long before Draupadi was even born – when Dhritarashtra was denied the throne in favour of Pandu.

That Draupadi was offered to Karna by Krishna in an attempt to lure him to the Pandava camp is another proof forwarded by Karve that ascertains how little power she had in the world of men. "Draupadi did not cause the war. She wanted it, but as the true inheritors of India's patriarchal society, the Pandavas were hardly men to bow to the wishes of their wives" (Karve 86). In her study of Kunti and Gandhari, too, Karve establishes that despite their strong wills, these women were directed by their fathers, husbands and sons. "Men acted, men directed and women suffered" (Karve 40) she says of these women, a statement resonant of what Simone de Beauvoir says in her *Second Sex,* "Woman has always been man's dependant...has gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received." (De Beauvoir 19)

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Karve makes another observation about Draupadi, this time not a very favourable one. What has been regarded as a confirmation of the strength of Draupadi's character – her courage to question a court full of men, demanding justice, is termed by the author here as her "greatest mistake" (Karve 89). "Draupadi's question was not only foolish, it was terrible...Draupadi was standing there arguing like a lady pundit when what was happening to her was so hideous that she should only have cried out for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code." (Karve 90). Her insistence on questioning the notion of 'dharma' and raising the question about the legality of Yudhisthir's right to stake her in the game of dice after having already lost himself and her overall conduct in the face of adversity are often cited as examples of her prowess.

For Karve to say that the best option for her would have been to submissively cry out for pity could be considered to be quite an anti-feminist idea. The author's reasoning that Draupadi "had spoken in the assembly of men, something she should have known she must not do" (Karve 91) reads as lopsided and compels one to question her apparent 'objective' reading of Draupadi. It seems to co-opt itself within the patriarchal frame of interpretation, undermining Draupadi's rebellion as an act of resistance to power and making it once again about a patriarchal "Kshatriya code" and an "assembly of men".

Karve's assertion of Draupadi's "mistake" raises several questions –would Draupadi still be considered to be a prominent female force had she begged for mercy, even if it did save her from being dishonoured? Would tears and acceptance of her fate ensure protection of her honour? Is such an assertion not an act of denial of agency to Draupadi and, by implication, to any woman who encounters a similar situation of humiliation and dishonour? These are unsettling questions with no easy answers. However, these questions bring into sharp focus the essential difficulty in the portrayal and positioning of Draupadi. Even narratives which posit themselves as either speaking on behalf of Draupadi or giving her voice to speak for herself, wrestle with the complexities that make her and often emerge as guilty of either sanitizing her representation and/or interpreting her 'unconventionality' through a critical lens drawn from a patriarchal discourse.

Much like Karve, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1984), originally written in Odia, presents a similar instance of falling into the trappings of a patriarchal code of interpretation in its rewriting of Draupadi. As she expresses in the "Afterword" to her novel *Yajnaseni*, Ray, pained by the stigma still attached to Draupadi's name because of her polyandrous marriage, was driven to composing a work that would present the deeper aspects of Draupadi's mind. "I have tried to present a psychological picture of Krishnaa as a woman living a predicament-ridden life, full of variety" (Ray 401) she says and does seem to have successfully achieved this end.

However, a book written by a female author about a female character of prominence would also be expected to have certain feminist elements in it. Does it hold true for *Yajnaseni*? Toril Moi in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine", where she draws the difference between the three terms mentioned in the title, says – "A female tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a Feminist one" (Belsely and Moore 106). She refers to the essay "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" by Rosalind Coward in which Coward discusses the general confusion of 'feminist' and 'female' writing

and quotes her "It is just not possible to say that women-centred writings have any relationship with feminism"(Belsely and Moore 120) and goes on to elaborate-

> Since patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women's experience, rendering them visible is clearly an important anti-patriarchal strategy. On the other hand, however, women's experience can be made visible in alienating, deluded or degrading ways (120).

Yajnaseni does raise some pertinent questions about the oppression women face but the character of the heroine as has been presented cannot be said to have completely broken free from a conventional projection. She is not a rebel. Yajnaseni in Ray's novel comes across as a character that has internalised patriarchal ideologies. She considers it to be her duty to fulfil her father's desire, whether it be to aid him in his quest for vengeance or complying with his wish of getting her married to Krishna – "...I had no separate desire of my own. Just now I had made a vow before my father. So I was an offering to Krishna..." (Ray 9). Ultimately, however, Arjun is chosen for her. She is disappointed – "Did I have no wish of my own?" (Ray 23) – but she soon readjusts her emotions.

Her veneration for Sita is perceptible throughout the novel and so is her desire to embrace the ideals of womanhood. Her mind rebels when it is ordained that she should be married to all the five brothers but the values instilled in her by a male-dominated society comes to work and for the greater good she submits herself. Some of her views seem to be steeped in patriarchy, to say the least – "My bed was at my husbands' feet...all ten feet would be placed on it. This would be my appropriate dharma as a woman" (Ray 65).

She does question the laws that allow one man to have more than one wife but see a woman with more than one husband as a sinner. However, her rage at this inequality attains an element of ambivalence as she goes on to perceive her condition of being the wife of five men as a challenge to prove her chastity – a value that the patriarchal society seems to necessitate only in case of a woman. Ray's Yajnaseni sees it as an opportunity to prove that she could remain pure, unsullied, a 'sati' despite the strange marriage conditions.

Her rage and resentment at being insulted; her disappointment at being left defenceless by her husbands and her firmness in the royal assembly are all highlighted. "I do not beg for anyone's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king" (Ray 238). Having vented her anger, however, she is "exhausted" and "surrenders herself to Krishna"(Ray 242). There seems to be a sense of seeking protection. "Lord, I am not mine own. This body is not mine. Therefore, the whole responsibility of this body is yours. All is yours. Hurt, reproach, insult, shame, doubt, modesty, everything is yours. It is you who are the primal cause. I know nothing" (Ray 243). She expresses her gratitude to Krishna for saving not only her honour but the honour of all womankind and wishes to spend her life as his handmaid. On meeting him she opens up her heart and sobs "…Finding so understanding a friend as Krishna, how could I control myself? After all, I was a woman!" (Ray 250).

There are moments when her thoughts do reveal her awareness of the unfairness of the circumstances. After being abducted by Jayadrath and freed by the Pandavas, Draupadi agrees to pardon and free him for the sake of his wife Sushila, "Without any fault why should she have to undergo the ultimate suffering?"(Ray 322) She also curses "womanhood for the inequality in the rules and laws of society for the sexes"(Ray 322). However, despite these occasional expressions of outrage at the inequality, what comes strongly in the novel is not her image as a dissenter but the image of a woman who strives to be an ideal woman prompted by the expectations of the society.

Like Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) also offers a subjective reinterpretation of Draupadi, where she herself is the author of her story. In both these novels, Draupadi is demythologised and a woman writes her own story 'that lay invisible between the line of the men's exploits'. However, a very different portrayal can be seen in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions.* A powerful voice dominates this novel as Draupadi is presented in less constricted, more frank terms. The germ of rebellion that is to be found in the original representation of Panchaali gains greater proportion in this projection. Some explicitly feminist ideas echo throughout the book and most of these are very contemporary and relevant.

Born out of the sacrificial fire in the fire ceremony her father had performed praying for a son who would aid him in his plans of vengeance, Draupadi's first memories are that of rejection. "He held out his arms – but for my brother alone. It was my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people...Only my brother that he wanted" (Divakaruni 6). The rejection faced by Draupadi stands true for hundreds of girls in the Indian society, born to parents who seek sons – heirs of their family. Next comes the question of her education. She hungers for knowledge but it is hard to come by. "A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn?" (Divakaruni 23). While she craves for lessons that conferred power, the attempts being made to instruct her in singing, dancing, painting, sewing and other arts meant for noble ladies makes her feel the "world of women tightening its noose around her" (Divakaruni 21).

We have before us an example of the curtailing powers of the society, the denial of opportunities on the basis of gender. Virginia Woolf in her piece "Shakespeare's Sister" in *A Room of One's Own* dwells on this idea – how a woman with Shakespeare's genius in Shakespeare's time would have stood no chance because she did not fulfil what was the major criterion to even attempt to make it big – she wasn't a man. "She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school...She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face…" (Woolf 71).

The Palace of Illusions not only depicts the disadvantages a woman has to face but also presents the burden of gendered roles in a patriarchal society. Draupadi's brother Dhristadyumna is thrust into the pursuit of revenge, to which, perhaps, his disposition is not suited. On the other hand, her ambitions of changing the course of history are constantly scoffed at. "He was too cautious, sometimes I told him that gods must have got mixed up when they pushed us out from the fire. He should have been the girl and I the boy" (Divakaruni 55).

A desire for independence; to free herself from the restricted life she leads at her father's is born in her at a very early stage and this want of freedom is seen constantly associated with her desire for a home of her own where she has control over her life. She says of her father's palace – "Staring down from my rooms at the bare compound stretching below, I'd feel dejection...when I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different...it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home" (Divakaruni 7). The craving for a place of her own continues even as she is welcomed into the Palace of her in-laws. It would never be home for her. When the Pandavas do build a Palace of their own, she plays an instrumental role in deciding what it would be like, elated, at finally getting what she wanted. She names it the 'Palace of Illusions' and her role as its mistress only makes her more independent, enhancing her personality. Virginia Woolf had emphasised on a sense of independence for the proper cultivation of the creative faculties of women authors – "...a woman must have money and a room of her own..." (Woolf 7). Draupadi's abilities are heightened by the control she has assumed in her palace – "Being mistress of the Palace of Illusions had transformed me in a way I hadn't realised" (Divakaruni 180).

The novel doesn't depart from the epic in so far as the portrayal of the major events concerning Draupadi's life; she is still subjected to decisions taken by the men around her. The novelty lies in presenting to the readers her protesting voice at every such juncture, which couldn't have been possible in the larger framework of the epic. As Yudhisthir and Drupad debate the prospect of her marrying all the five Pandavas, Draupadi has no say in the matter. Yudhisthir suggests that if all five can't marry her, none would, leaving her at her father's house and Drupad suggests that marrying five men would make his daughter a prostitute and being abandoned would leave her with no other option but to embrace an honourable death. This argument strongly hints at the passivity women are subjected to. Draupadi, of course, always believed that she deserved better and we hear her determined voice – "I didn't fear the fate they imagined for me. I had no intentions of committing self-immolation (I had other plans for my life). But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options..." (Divakaruni 118).

Her marriage to five men perhaps made her unique in allowing her the freedom that only men had enjoyed for centuries – of having more than one spouse. However, the choice was not hers. The conditions might be different but the oppression is not negated and Draupadi realises this, "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand, whether I wanted it or not...Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husband's benefit than mine..."(Divakaruni 120).

Her attraction for Karna from the time she sees him at her Swayamvara, her regret at not having been won by him is evident almost throughout the novel. This marks a complete departure from her portrayal of a devoted wife (Pativrata) for whom even the thought of a man other than her husbands would be considered to be unacceptable – "I confess: in spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna to be a better wife to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again..." (Divakaruni 172).

Dragged to the court amidst hundreds of men, as the slave of Duryodhan, she is resilient even in desperation. After a point, she lets go of her fear and sense of shame – "Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought, why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds

of decency" (Divakaruni 193). This attitude makes a strong statement. Even today, the society has a tendency of stigmatising the victims when the burden of the offence should clearly lie elsewhere. For the woman to get rid of the sense of shame imposed on her requires a lot of strength and it is absolutely essential.

She vehemently pines for vengeance, constantly reminding her husbands of how they had failed her. The Great War happens and she is avenged but she faces loss and pain too – her sons, brother, father all perish but the strength that has marked her character throughout the novel persists. She emerges as a powerful and an able Queen committing herself to the betterment of the women left destitute after the war. She becomes the upholder of women's rights.

> I knew how it felt to be helpless and hopeless. Hadn't I been almost stripped of my clothing and my honour in this very city? Hadn't I been abducted in the forest and attacked in Virat's court when men thought I was without protection? I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to women... (Divakaruni 323).

If Divakaruni's Draupadi was given a powerful voice, the central character of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi", originally written in Bengali, is endowed with much more than that. Her challenges to patriarchy are no longer only in the form of words; her resistance is more of an offence than defence. In this radical appropriation, the author completely reshapes the character of Draupadi. The transformation of the setting and context from ancient to the modern makes her more relevant.

The way she is portrayed here is a major subversion from her presentation in the epic. Draupadi no longer remains the high-born Aryan princess, said to be the cause of the Great War; here, she is a tribal woman who is a participant in a war – she is a part of the Naxalbari movement targeting those involved in the oppression of the landless peasantry. She is already a rebel. The reader is introduced to the reader between two versions of her name (Devi 10) – 'Draupadi', the name given to her by her high-class mistress, and 'Dopdi' – the tribalised form of it; the two names indicating the dual nature of the reinterpretation in this story. The character of Dopdi is a derivation of Draupadi; she is drawn from her and yet is different from her. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her Translator's Foreword to the story states that "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" (Devi 12).

In "Draupadi", Mahashweta deflates and transgresses the parochial, apolitical, socio personal framework within which the female protagonists have conventionally been restricted and defined in traditional feminist fiction. Dopdi is presented as an aggressive comrade and there can be no doubts about her thirst for vengeance – "His mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll put out his eyes", she had said during an attack on a landlord (Devi 30). Her resolve is strong, come what may, she is not going to betray her fellow revolutionaries. No degree of torture is going to break her. Her fortitude is soon put to test, perhaps in a crueller way than she had expected, but she doesn't falter. If anything, she comes out of it stronger. She is apprehended and in police custody faces brutal gang rape at the

behest of the police chief, Senanayak. The insults heaped on Draupadi of the epic are magnified in this case and what the former was only threatened with materialises into deed in Dopdi's case. "Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years... Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts...Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four – five – six – seven – then Draupadi had passed out." (Devi 35)

As attempts were being made to disrobe Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, her prayers to the God incarnate Krishna were answered and she was covered in never-ending drapes of clothing; her modesty and honour was preserved. A masculine force had come to her aid. In Dopdi's case no such thing happens. We do not hear a word of prayer. She has no one to turn to – no husband (who is dead), no God. In Spivak's words "Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops." (Devi 12)

The resilience continues to assert itself as the night darkens. "In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth" (Devi 35). She is not one to beg for mercy. She is given no respite; till the morning comes she is repeatedly brutalised, then thrown into a tent. Now, it is time for Dopdi to reclaim agency. Summoned to the chief's tent, she agrees to go but will not put her white cloth back on. A woman, who has been shamed, walks out naked in the 'bright sunlight' with her 'head high'. This is incomprehensible for the men who have subjected her to rape, as a punishment. The desired effect is obviously missing. Yesterday she was stripped and shamed; today, she shames and shocks the men by insisting on remaining naked.

She challenges them to clothe her if they dare to; questions their position as men; chides them to do her more harm than they already have. It is she, who, now, attacks them. She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob 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?" (Devi 37). An "unarmed target" launches an offensive with her two mangled breasts, leaving the Chief 'terribly afraid'. Dopdi, being doubly subalterned by her positions first as a member of the minority tribe, and then as a woman, even after being subjected to acute humiliation and agony, rebelliously transcends the limits of her existence and finds a voice of protest that silences the patriarchal system. The figure of Dopdi/Draupadi truly transforms into a modern figure of resistance modelled on the older heroine, taking her legacy to newer heights.

In "A Literature of Their Own", Showalter sets out to describe three major phases of female literary tradition and "to show how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture." (11)

> First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalisation* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, an *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity (Showalter 13).

Interpreted against such a viewpoint, Pratibha Ray's representation of Draupadi could be read as an example of imitation and internalisation of established patriarchal norms and standards. Mahasweta Devi's representation of Draupadi becomes an emblem of protest against the set patriarchal parameters of female representation while Divakaruni's representation of Draupadi, strikes the note of self-discovery beyond the circumscribed patriarchal space and definition.

Draupadi stands as a figure and emerges as an idea, a concept hyphenating the domains of theory and praxis; the world of fiction and the world of lived experiences. In "Draupadi" Dopdi transcends into a modern figure of resistance and is placed in a particular geo-political context- she is part of the Naxalbari movement and is subjected to custodial gangrape. By refusing to clean or clothe herself she refuses to allow those responsible for victimising her to remove the signs of the atrocities they have committed. She also offers her nakedness as an affront to their masculinity.

> Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, her torture intimidate her, or her rape diminish her…It is instead a deliberate refusal of a sign system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss), and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy (what is a 'man') (Sunder Rajan 155).

The theatrical adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" presented by Kalakshetra, directed by renowned Manipuri director Heisnam Kanhailal is another example of the character's malleability and adaptability and her relevance in multiple geopolitical contexts. The narrative of the short story "Draupadi" had at its centre the Naxalbari movement, its adaptation by a Manipuri theatre group attains greater significance in the light of the fact that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been in force in Manipur. The AFSPA grants the armed forces the power to shoot in law enforcement situations, to arrest without warrant, and to detain people without time limits. As a result of these powers, it has been often alleged that the armed forces routinely engage in torture and other ill-treatment during interrogations.

When the play was performed, Sabitri Heisnam played Dopdi, the victim of custodial rape. At the end she had become nude before the audiences. The play wasn't received very well at the time of its release in Imphal and Heisnam was criticised for nudity on stage. In an article published in The Indian Express, published on March 19, 2017, it is related how on July 15, 2004, Heisnam Kanhailal and his actor wife Sabitri Heisnam were in Delhi, taking a class at the National School of Drama (NSD), when they received a phone call. At Kangla Fort in Imphal, Manipur, where the 17 Assam Rifles were stationed, a group of middle-aged women had taken off their clothes and stood with a banner that read "Indian Army Rape Us". The demonstration had taken place to protest the custodial killing of a Manipuri village girl Thangjam Manorama. She was allegedly tortured and raped before being killed. In protesting the way these women did real life seems to have taken its language of protest from the theatre. The 17 Assam Rifles was moved out of the Kangla Fort within a year of the protest.

Sabitri Heisnam's decision to perform the act of disrobing herself on stage during the climax of the play had been considered to be culturally insensitive and allegedly disregarded the dignity of women. Deepti Misri in "'Are You a Man?': Performing Naked Protest in India" refers to Sabitri's reflections on the negative responses to her performance. She quotes Heisnam:

> 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. 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. (613)

Apart from the issues of custodial rape, institutional torture meted out in form of sexual humiliation, Heisnam's representation of Draupadi also seem to highlight some other extra-literary ideas. The fact that an actor's nudity on stage could have raised strong questions about the degradation of dignity of women but many incidents of disrobing, stripping in public go unprotested is a sad reality. These are 'punishment' given to women. Mahasweta Devi in conversation with Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak taped in Calcutta in December, 1991, says, "When a woman is raped the entire judiciary system is against the woman. The general consensus is: only women of loose character get raped, for India parades that India holds women in great honour" (Devi xiv, *Maps*). The fact that India 'parades' that it holds its women in great honour is a very strong and relevant statement. The idea that the notions that are held in theory are perhaps not translated into reality is close to truth. The shame and stigma associated with rape survivors is something that the society imposes on them. It is this idea of shame that these two representations of Draupadi have tried to subvert. Sexual humiliation might also be used as a retributive measure, as was perhaps the case with Draupadi.

> Draupadi's vulnerability lay in her polyandry; but, as we are told elsewhere in the epic, it is also her habitual pride, haughtiness, mockery and assertiveness that call forth the resentment and wish for revenge of the Kauravas. Since she is chaste she is saved, but because she is blameworthy she is subjected to the chastening ordeal." (Sunder Rajan 151).

Such instances time and again draw attention to the irony inherent within the concept of perceiving women as venerable particularly in the Indian context. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak states "If in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). In the most generic sense the term 'subaltern' implies workers, women, peasants, minorities or those social groups and individuals that have been marginalised, erased and rendered invisible within a nation's history writing/culture making enterprise. Spivak remains sceptical about the intellectual's ability to speak for the subaltern. Yet such an enterprise is necessitated to move forward towards a feminist praxis which could become an intersectional space for the multiplicity of identity and lived experience.

The measure of a successful feminist theory is its ability to make visible that which is hidden, silenced or distorted. Its very foundation pivots on forging a link between discourse and the lived experiences of women within power structures which create various types of oppression and

discrimination. Feminism and feminist theory cannot and must not be confined to abstractions, over generalisations and mere theorising. These need to posit that which is relevant to the objective of attaining an egalitarian society. Stories play a powerful role in reaffirming, challenging, subverting, disrupting and reshaping our cultural spaces and what these constitute. As accounts drawn from lived experiences, stories can be about the past, the present, or the future or they could serve to blur the demarcations between these three.

Accounts as multi-layered, complex and timeless as the *Mahabharata* offer to us a rich source of material to reclaim, revise and renew our perspectives and worldview. With its vast galaxy of stories and characters, the *Mahabharata* becomes an important case study towards a better comprehension of the functioning of the cultural power structures. Draupadi, as one of the central characters of this epic, emerges as a metaphor through which such power structures may be analysed. She becomes a ready site of resistance, providing avenues to challenge and possibly dismantle these power structures. The timelessness and continued contemporaneity of Draupadi arises as much from those of the epic to which she belongs as from the simultaneous possibility and impossibility put forth by her complex, layered, fluxional subjectivity. Kate Millett writes,

> The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "Otherness" of women. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is the "Other" or alien. (46)

Draupadi continues to fascinate through her malleability to transcend the 'materiality' of the body marked by power, circumscribed by contexts and located in specific cultural/social positions to become an intersectional site of representations and re-presentations. An attempt has been made to trace the various recontextualisations of Draupadi in order to arrive as close as possible to a more comprehensive understanding of Draupadi's subjectivity, punctuated as it is by the subjectivities of those who attempt to represent her, and how she functions as a subversive metaphor continually disrupting patriarchal structures. Draupadi's representations hold testimony to how she, body and mind, inhabits oppressive spaces regulated by patriarchy, is shaped by them and yet, she carries power within her to reshape and redefine them.

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