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A Feminist Study of Draupadi and Dopdi: Emergence from Oppression to Empowerment

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In India, the treatment of women and questions related to their status has been a topic of debate for centuries. Indian society is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and values, which have had a great impact on women's lives. In the patriarchal society, men occupy dominant position of power and authority while on the other hand women continued to remain subservient to men and were denied right to freedom. Despite some progress in recent years, women in India continue to face discrimination, harassment, and violence in various forms. The caste system also played a significant role in determining the status of women. Women from lower castes were even more oppressed and doubly jeopardized.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the portrayal of Draupadi in Mahabharata by C. Rajagopalachari and Dopdi in Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' through the lens of feminist theories. It examines the gender dynamics and power structures at play in both the texts, exploring how Draupadi and Dopdi are positioned in relation to patriarchal norms and societal expectations. By drawing on the works of various feminist theorists, the paper aims to shed light on the ways in which women emerge from oppression to empowerment over a period by defying societal obligations. Draupadi and Dopdi are two women from vastly different contexts, separated by centuries and cultural traditions. Draupadi is a mythological figure from the epic Mahabharata, while Dopdi is a fictional character in Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi'. However, both women share certain commonalities in their experiences as women living in patriarchal societies.

The main female characters in the Mahabharata including Draupadi experience a variety of patriarchal oppressions. The Pandavas, who are at war with the Kauravas, are married to Draupadi. The Pandavas do nothing to defend Draupadi as she is publicly humiliated and stripped naked by the Kauravas in front of all the male courtiers in one of the play's most dramatic scenes. This incident serves as a stark illustration of the objectification and dehumanisation of women that occurs in patriarchal systems. The tribal female character Dopdi in "Draupadi" is similarly raped and tormented by the police during a counterinsurgency campaign. Both the cases are instances of how bodies of women become a medium to subjugate them. However, in both these texts it could be seen that Draupadi and Dopdi resist the patriarchal subjugation imposed on them in multiple ways. Draupadi is portrayed as a strong woman who challenges the men who try to suppress her. She criticises her husbands in one of the scenes for failing to defend her when she was being humiliated, saying, "If I have any merit at all, if I have lived any kind of life that deserves respect, then you, my husbands, should be protecting me" (Rajagopalachari 191). Her husbands' presence matter nothing for her if they are unable to protect and safeguard her honour. It is a serious question to the man-woman relationship as Prof (Dr) Kumkum Ray writes in one of her poems, "I the seeker / You the goal / I the traveler / You the destination" (Ray, *FFBF* 44). However, Draupadi loses the significance of such relationship when she had to seek help from the Devine Lord Krishna. Dopdi, in a similar vein, is a tough and defiant lady who withstands the police aggression used against her. "Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Devi 402).

In C Rajagopalachari's retelling of the Mahabharata, Draupadi is a central character who is subjected to the patriarchal values and norms prevalent in ancient Indian society. Although she is a strong and intelligent woman, Draupadi is subjected to patriarchy in a number of ways, including through her marriage to the five Pandavas. Arjuna wins Draupadi as his bride in the Mahabharata, but the other Pandavas also wed her in order to grant their mother's wish. Even by the norms of ancient India, this polyandrous union is exceptional, and Draupadi is frequently regarded as a representation of feminine sexuality and desire. Men, however, also use her sexuality against her by accusing her of having affairs with other men and humiliating her for her wants. For instance, the sage Vyasa responds to Draupadi's question about why she had to wed five husbands by saying that she had to wed so many lovers, yet her desires are insatiable.



Draupadi's gender affects how she is perceived in society. Even though she is a queen and a part of the Pandava court, she is nevertheless held to the standards and expectations that were imposed on women. A portrayal of it could be seen when she questions Yudhishtira's decision to gamble away their kingdom and themselves, he claims, "It is not for women to give advice on state affairs" (Rajagopalachari 194). It depicts how Draupadi's opinions and knowledge are not valued simply because she is a woman no matter what her stature is. As de Beauvoir notes, "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 11).

When Draupadi is brought to the court after the Pandavas have lost the bet, Duryodhana orders her to sit on his lap, an act of great insult to her dignity. However, Draupadi is unable to resist him, as she is powerless in the face of his physical strength and the norms of patriarchy that dictate that women must be submissive and obedient to men. Draupadi is considered as a bait in the game of dice itself reflects how in the patriarchal set up women are merely viewed as objects. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, "woman is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (Beauvoir, 14). Draupadi is the 'Other', a woman who is subjected to the power and dominance of men.

The treatment and portrayal of Draupadi in the Mahabharata make clear her status as a subordinate. She is a woman, a member of the oppressed gender, and she further experiences subjugation because of the prevalent patriarchal standards and practices of her era. She is a queen as well, but the male-dominated culture in which she lives undermines her rank and authority. She is made even more vulnerable by the additional marginalisation and oppression brought on by her identification as a lady from a lower caste. Additionally, Draupadi's voice is frequently muted and disregarded in the Mahabharata, even during crucial times when she most needs to be heard. For instance, when her husband, Yudhishtira, gambles away their freedom, Draupadi's pleas are drowned by the noise and chaos of the hall. She cries out for help when she is being disrobed but her cries are disregarded as no one comes to her rescue.

The issue of land rights is one of the main problems that tribal people in India face. Being stripped of their identity is another issue. The dominant culture frequently threatens the tribals' unique cultural identity. The issue of gender-based violence is also a significant concern for the tribals in India. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, "Tribal women are subjected to multiple forms of violence, including sexual violence, by both state and non-state actors" (Spivak 70).

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" portrays the plight of tribal communities, especially tribal women, in India. Through the story, Devi exposes the systemic exploitation, oppression, and violence faced by the Adivasi women in being doubly marginalised. Beauvoir argues that women are oppressed by society and their role is defined by the male-dominated culture (Beauvoir 710). Devi's Draupadi similarly stresses how patriarchal society continues to abuse and oppress tribal women especially a single and a widowed. They become the object of male gaze. It is a period of misery and desolation in a widowed woman's life as Prof. Dr. KumKum Ray writes in the collection of her poems *Shades of Resilience*, "A catastrophe slowly seeps when a life partner leaves" (23). However, the patriarchal society ignores the pain of such women and they become only an object of male desire. Similar fate is borne by Dopdi in Devi's short story as well as the struggles and sufferings of the Adivasi women, who experience numerous forms of oppression, including economic exploitation, cultural servitude, and sexual abuse.

Devi portrays Draupadi as a tough and courageous lady who doesn't allow the abuse and persecution, she experiences to break her. Through her defiance and fight against the upper-caste oppressors, the titular heroine Draupadi overcomes her tyranny and achieves empowerment. The quote "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (Devi 402) is a powerful example of Draupadi's defiance and her reclaiming of her agency and power. Draupadi is violently beaten and sexually molested by the upper-caste males, but she does not allow herself to be silenced and confronts them. She challenges the dominant patriarchal society and makes her identity known. "Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Devi 402).

Dopdi's transformation from a victim to a survivor is rooted in the embrace of her tribal identity. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283). Dopdi intentionally chooses to embrace her tribal identity as a means of rebelling against the prevailing society; it is not something that she is born with. She draws strength and resiliency from her tribal identity, which enables her to survive the cruelty of the state.



Dopdi's transformation is also linked to her ability to reclaim her voice and her agency. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, 'The right to speak and be heard by others is frequently denied to the subaltern (89). Dopdi is initially rendered silent and speechless by her encounters with violence and trauma, but she gradually discovers a means to regain her voice via her resistance and her rebellion. She aggressively opposes the state's efforts to repress her rather than accepting a role as a helpless victim.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores the social suppression of marginalised voices. Through their brutality and tyranny, the upper-caste men in 'Draupadi' seek to stifle and destroy Draupadi's voice and agency, yet Draupadi emerges victorious when she stands against these voices.

According to feminist theorists, women's freedom and empowerment are a result of their own agency and capacity to confront oppression. A sign of Draupadi's agency and active resistance is her defiance and resistance against her oppressors. This contrasts with how women are portrayed in patriarchal society, when they are seen as powerless, passive targets of oppression. The figure of Draupadi is reimagined as a subaltern woman who resists and challenges oppression in her own particular way by the character of Dopdi, who questions conventional ideas of femininity and power. The way Dopdi reacts to the abuse and injustice she endures is one illustration of this rebellion. Dopdi actively resists and battles her oppressors rather than giving in to them or asking for assistance from others. She says, "She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me" (Devi 402).

Dopdi's inversion of Draupadi is also evident in the way she questions gender norms and expectations. Dopdi is a feisty and independent woman who refuses to be constrained by conventional gender roles, in contrast to Draupadi from the Mahabharata, who is portrayed as a chaste and devout wife, "What's this, a tribal called Dopdi?" (Devi 392).

Dopdi establishes herself as a strong and rebellious person who opposes established systems of patriarchal oppression and power by her active resistance. Many famous women in history have come and gone, unable to endure time's passing and ignorance of them. The world is still familiar with Draupadi even today. Despite her best efforts, Draupadi from the Mahabharata was unable to escape the oppression she was living under because of social norms. Dopdi is a contemporary woman who fights against male patriarchy by using her identity as a Dalit woman as a weapon. She resists allowing the chains to make her spirit a slave. Her rape did not shock her spirit; instead, she utilised it to demonstrate how powerful she had grown. She clearly demonstrated how she transforms her impairments into her indomitable power and escape from all the captivity she had experienced by refusing to cover herself up with the clothes the guard offered her and embracing her strong body covered in bruises and sexual assault marks by embracing her bruised and scarred body.

National newspapers and mainstream media created a stir in March/April 2005 with some of the most upsetting depictions of women rejecting the state and New Delhi. These images showed a number of middle-aged Manipuri ladies protesting in front of the Imphal headquarters of the Assam Rifles. Notably, the women in the pictures exclaim "Come rape us!" while facing the opulent gates of the army station. The human face of New Delhi was covered in nakedness that was waving like a pistol. Intellectual circles in Imphal, Kolkata, and New Delhi were fully aware of the motivation behind this extraordinary protest act, which involved a long day's curfew followed by Chitranjan Das's self-immolation in response to Manorama Devi's puzzling death in unrest-plagued Imphal. The tremendous political provocation definitely motivated those women to strip as a kind of in public protest.

Manipur women were inspired by Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" to parade bare in protest of the military forces and their cruel and intrinsically gendered reprisals. A stage adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" was presented by Heshnam Kanhailal, a renowned Manipuri theatre director, during the turbulent and bloody years (roughly 2004–2005) of army atrocities in the North-Eastern states. It was through this staging that Mahasweta's story entered the common people's minds and sparked a rebellion in the violent region of Manipur. (Dr. Munmy Chhetry Baruah 236).

The way Dopdi handles being oppressed is one of the main ways she differs from Draupadi. Dopdi doesn't want to be a helpless victim like Draupadi, who is mostly a victim of circumstance and is at the mercy of the strong men in her life. Instead, she decides to take matters into her own hands and organises her tribe to fight back against the forces trying to wipe them out. This defiance, which enables Dopdi to take charge of her own fate and fight against the forces that want to oppress her, is a crucial component of her empowerment. On Dopdi's path to empowerment, there is a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie. She receives assistance from her tribe throughout the narrative and collaborates closely with them to combat their captors. This sense of teamwork and common struggle is crucial to Dopdi's empowerment because it enables her to lean on those around her for support and oppose forces that wish to divide and rule.



In contrast, Draupadi's identity is primarily determined by her interactions with the males in her life. She is given in marriage to five brothers as part of a political pact, and the choices made by these strong men will have a significant impact on how she turns out. Although she occasionally demonstrates bravery and rebellion, like when she challenges her husbands to defend her honour, her general character is mostly determined by her function as a pawn in a political game.

The character of Dopdi from Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' is an example of a strong and uplifting person who defies the forces of oppression. She represents resistance and resiliency by her physicality, disobedience, and feeling of community. Dopdi is able to escape the oppression that Draupadi was unable to escape due to the chains of societal expectations and norms for women. Both stories about the struggle to escape oppression reverberate today's bitter, powerful, and shocking reality, which are based on Indian culture's ambitious patriarchal traditions. Unfortunately, even today, women end up like Draupadi from Mahabharat as a result of a society that has yet to change significantly in terms of women's empowerment. To inspire us, a few more DopdiMehjen appear from the crowd, fighting tirelessly to break free from oppression and achieve empowerment.

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