

## The Curse of Being Woman: Mythological Echoes in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

Shankar Lal Jhanjhnodia & Sanjit Mishra

*Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee. Email: shankjhanjhnodia1991@gmail.com*

---

### Abstract

Mythology, like history, has a tendency to repeat and reinvent itself. In order to comprehend the contemporary world, the modern writer seeks a parallel in the remote past. Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* revisits the past and recreates the character of the mythical Draupadi to formulate an account of a helpless woman who must fend for herself unlike the epical Draupadi who had Lord Krishna as her saviour. Both these characters—Dopdi of Mahasweta Devi's story and the mythical Draupadi—symbolize exploitation at the hands of their patriarchs. However, Dopdi represents the extreme abjectness of circumstances in the case of a woman in the modern world that boasts of an ultimate cultural advancement. Separated by thousands of years in time, the two are united in this fictional account of Mahasweta Devi only to showcase the never-ending miseries of the women who are no better than the Fanon's *wretched of the earth*. This paper presents an analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* under the archetypal framework given by the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye reasonably appropriated into the contemporary Indian context.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Draupadi, Lord Krishna, exploitation, saviour, archetypal.

Hindu mythology has played a vital role in shaping of Indian literature. Writers have extensively used myths in the backdrop of their plots to address their personal traumas or national insurgencies. They have sometimes distorted or sometimes reconstructed these Hindu myths to best suit their purpose. The great Indian epic the Mahabharata has been in the center in most of the Indian mythological texts. This great ancient text appears the microcosm of the world. It contains all sorts of characters knitting a proper structure of the society. This paper attempts to establish the fact that literary discourse finds its roots in mythological archetypes. These texts develop their plots on archetypal elements to trace a history of exploitation from their archetypal prototypes. The renowned Canadian critic Northrop Frye puts it as:

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. (Northrop Frye)

A champion of the marginalized tribal societies, Mahasweta Devi is known for her works which give voice to the downtrodden. She picks Draupadi episode as an archetypal incident from the Mahabharata and knits a story of tyranny and exploitation of the modern women around it. The present paper attempts to find out the parallel between the archetypal *cheerharan* (disrobing of Draupadi by the hands of Dushasana amid the court) of Draupadi in Mahabharata episode and ongoing onslaught on contemporary women of Kali Yuga.

According to Northrop Frye Archetypes are those recurring narrative designs which get identified with the study of myths, dreams and social rituals. In Jungian theory these recurring archetypal patterns work as primordial images which happen to appear unconsciously all around the world later on forming the roots of mythology. These prototypes constantly appear in modern literary discourses to challenge or subvert these authoritative and hierarchical patterns of the contemporary world. Frye writes:

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

The beginning of the story reminds us of the mythical incident of the ill fate of Draupadi when she is born from an *Agni Kunda* (altar) as an addendum to his brother Dhrishtadyumna. She was firstly turned down by her father Drupada for he only considered his son Dhrishtadyumna to be worthwhile for his revenge with sage Dronacharya. She was accepted on the terms that the boon of Drupada would only work with her acceptance and that she would play an important role in the politics of *Aryavarta* (India) later on. As Draupadi was most needed in the politics of Aryavarta, so did indeed the most wanted the protagonist of the story Dopdi Mejhen in the very beginning of the story. The introduction of the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen in the story happens like this:

Name Dopdi Mejhen, age 27, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrahjarh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...an exchange between two medallioned *uniforms*. (Draupadi)

The protagonist of the story is one of the most wanted rebels among the Naxal affected areas. Like archetypal heroine Draupadi, her life is full of hardships and ordeals. Her tale is a saga of pain and disgrace altogether but she placed her strides without losing her glory and sense of self-respect vanquishing each one of the perpetrators of her modesty. As suggestive by the attributive characteristics of her archetypal namesake, Dopdi, the protagonist waged war against the exploitative feudal system. As the birth of Draupadi was happened for the cause of vengeance, Dopdi too sacrificed her life to fight for the cause of common people. She was chief activist along with her husband Dulna Majhi in the murder of the landlord Surja Sahu who refused them to use the water of his wells during the time of the drought.

In 1971, in the famous *Operation Bakuli*, when three villages were *cordoned off* and *machine gunned*, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the *main culprits*. Murdering surja sahu and his son, occupying *upper-caste* wells and tubewells during the *drought*, not *surrendering* those three young men to the police. In all this they were the chief instigators. In the morning, at the time of the body count, the couple could not be found. (Draupadi)

The horrible drought and the discrimination based on caste system led Dopdi and her husband to take revenge of Surja Sahu who treated them like untouchable beasts. The retaliation followed by the authorities symbolizes the unduly rule by Duryodhana who only followed those terms which could strengthen his kingship neglecting all sorts of legal and moral codes of conduct.

Dulna and Dopdi went underground for a long time in a Neanderthal darkness. The special forces, attempting to pierce that dark by an armed search, compelled quite a few santhals in the various districts of west Bengal to meet their Maker against their will. (Draupadi)

The potent of Senanayak in matching with the power of the opposition can be modeled after the mighty character Karan in the Mahabharata who was a gem inside and poisonous too at the same time due to his outside influence. Karan didn't want to do any injustice to Draupadi but he couldn't resist it because he found himself burdened with false altruism of selfish Duryodhana. Karan was such an accomplished soldier that even Arjun would seem tarnished in archery skills and his respect towards enemy warriors find match nowhere in the history.

Senanayak knows the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do. First, therefore, he presents an encomium on the military genius of the sikhs. Then he explains further: is it only the opposition that should find power at the end of the barrel of a gun?...I should mention here that, although the other side make little of him, Senanayak is not to be trifled with. Whatever his *practice*, in *theory* he respects the opposition. Respects them because they could be neither understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude. (Draupadi)

After the murder of Surja Sahu, Dopdi and her husband were compelled to depart from their place of native birth and made a dense forest their *karambhoomi* (working-place) to take on the authorities by engaging in guerilla warfare.

Since after escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner, they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers, *rank and file*. (Draupadi)

The couple living in the forest of Jharkhani seems like Pandavas living in their exile to combat the injustice committed towards them. They face there endless troubles to keep their body and soul together. The retaliatory actions of government forced the couple to wander haplessly from one place to another in the forest still with their undaunted spirits to keep their resistance alive. The witch-hunt to nab Dopdi in the forest appears a repetition of the Mahabharata episode in which during the *agyatvas* (exile) Kichak, the brother-in-law of king Virat, tries to molest the honour of Sairindhri (disguise of Draupadi) as Dopdi too lives with ambiguous identity in the forest. The search for Dopdi, as she has disguised herself like her mythical namesake Draupadi, goes on in the jungle.

Thus the search for Dopdi continues. In the forest belt of Jharkhani, the Operation continues – will continue. It is a carbuncle on the government's backside... Catch Dopdi Mejhen. She will lead us to the other. (Draupadi)

The authorities make all efforts to trick Dopdi. They proclaim a reward of 200 in her name. Dopdi now seems to reckon her fate that her name holds.

Dopdi thought of something. Then said, Go home. I don't know what will happen, if they catch me don't know me. Can't you run away? No. Tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will kounter me. Let them. (Draupadi)

The authorities come with strongest ever determination to catch hold of her this time. They kept a policeman following Dopdi to find out her hideouts so that they could blow all the group of rebellions up. The pursuit of the police seems like Duryodhana ordering Dushasana to go and drag Draupadi down to conference hall.

Dopdi kept walking. Villages and fields, bush and rock – Public Works Department markers – sound of running steps at the back. Only one person running. Jharkhani forest still about two miles away. Now she thinks of nothing but entering the forest. She must let them know that the police have set up notices for her again. Must tell them that that

bastard sahib has appeared again. Must change hide-outs...Footsteps at her back. The steps keep a distance...Dopdi turned left. This way is the *camp*. Two miles. This is not the way to the forest. But Dopdi will not enter the forest with a cop at her back. Dopdi turned left. This way is the *camp*. Two miles. This is not the way to the forest. But Dopdi will not enter the forest with a cop at her back...Why is Dopdi going this way?...Dopdi will lead the cop to the burning 'ghat'. Patitpaban of saranda had been sacrificed in the name of Kali of the Burning Ghats. (Draupadi)

The authorities apprehended Dopdi after hatching a plot. She tricked the police and sacrificed her life without leading the troops to their hide-outs. Her audacity and headstrong will to face her perpetrators can only be matched with the exemplary Draupadi. All efforts of getting information from Dopdi went in vain and she stood firm and determined before the authorities. After surrender she understood her fate and reacted like her ancient prototype of her namesake. We can trace the helplessness of Dopdi through her gestures after her apprehension. The reaction of Dopdi after apprehension seems as though Draupadi were pleading to all those members who were sitting in Duryodhana's conference hall. After the failure of all members including Acharya Drona and Bhishma in protecting Draupadi, the high-pitched voice of Dopdi were as though she were crying before Bhishma and Drona to save her. The restlessness of modern Dopdi after her apprehension seems as though no one would be able on this planet to save her from the cruel hands of modern Duryodhanas. The consequent body language of Dopdi after her capture presents the mythical episode of Draupadi *cheerharan* before our eyes and her mental state shows that as if she knew her fate what her prototype already bore in the past.

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far. (Draupadi)

Dopdi finally gives up before the authorities and it can be compared to Draupadi being dragged down to Duryodhana's conference hall by Dushasana to snatch her modesty. Senanayak orders his men to *Make her* and *Do the needful*. Our consciousness seems to be busy in thinking and assuming as if there will appear Lord Krishna to drape an endless saari around her waist to save her from being molested.

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. 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...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. (Draupadi)

The fate of modern Draupadi appears tougher than that of her prototype. Even Lord Krishna didn't come to save her from more violent hands of Duryodhanas. What would have happened if Lord Krishna came to protect her? Would he have saved her from the hands of kalyugi

Duryodhanas? God himself would have felt ashamed after watching the fate of modern Dopdi. When Senanayak sees naked body of Dopdi he too seems lost and orders his men to wear her some clothes but ironical speech of Dopdi makes every man ashamed of the atrocities continuously being done to her. The very moment our hearts start aching and eyes deny reading a single line of the phenomenon text, when Dopdi asserts and ululates it to Senanayak that the putting robes on her body can't restore her honour. It stirs our soul so much that at a sudden we start comparing it with the Mahabharata incident when Draupadi questions to flag-bearers of the patriarchal society that who gave them right to stake her honour on the deck of dice board.

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, the object of your search, Dopdi Meihen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?...Where are her clothes?...Won't put them on, *Sir...* Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. 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? (Draupadi)

The story blatantly raises the issue of women exploitation. Mahasweta Devi cleverly incorporates mythical elements in her story and shows parallel between mythical archetype Draupadi and her protagonist Dopdi who undergo same fate even the latter facing the harder one. The story can also be seen from feminist perspective too as well known Critic Gayatri Spivak asserts in her phenomenon work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that it is hardly possible to retrieve the authentic voice of marginalized people till they remain powerless. Mahasweta Devi blends mythological context in her story to trace the lost voice of Draupadi. She further establishes the Foucault's post-structuralist connotation that it's only through discourse of power that the exploitation of Marginalized people happens. Relying upon these theoretical frameworks, we can say that Mahasweta Devi wants modern Draupadis to step forward to defend themselves. She wants them to be aware of the urgency of retrieving their authentic voice against their exploitation instead of expecting some magical feats from God or merely relying on their indelible fate. It is an approach that Gayatri Spivak through her noted postcolonial concept 'Strategic essentialism' introduces in 1980s to reunite equally marginalized and subaltern people to fight for their causes. We can conclude the story with these lines of the poem 'Suno Draupadi Shastra Utha Lo, Ab Govind Na Aayenge' by Pushyamitra Upadhyay.

छोडो मेहँदी खडक संभालो, खुद ही अपना चीर बचा लो,  
 दूत बिछाये बैठे शकुनि, मस्तक सब बिक जायेंगे,  
 सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो, अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे  
 कब तक आस लगाओगी तुम, बिके हुए अखबारों से,  
 कैसी रक्षा मांग रही हो दुशासन दरबारों से  
 स्वयं जो लज्जा हीन पड़े हैं वे क्या लाज बचायेंगे  
 सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे  
 कल तक केवल अँधा राजा, अब गूंगा बहस भी है  
 होठ सी दिए हैं जनता के, कानों पर पहस भी है,  
 तुम ही कहो ये अशु तुम्हारे, किसको क्या समझायेंगे?  
 सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो, अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे.

Translation of the aforementioned poem in my words can best suit the purpose of the writer who wants women to step forward to protect their honour on their own.

*Stop wearing henna, pick up your sword, save your garbs on your own,*

*Shakuni is well set with the game of dice, the glory of the good will be sold soon,  
Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour.*

*How much would you hope from the paid newspapers?  
What pleading you are doing to Dushasana (corrupt) courts.  
One who is itself shameless, how would save your modesty,  
Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour.*

*The king who had been blind until now, has turned himself dumb and deaf too,  
The lips of common men have been puckered; the ears have been covered too,  
You yourself tell us, what will your tears explain to anyone else?  
Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour.*

#### **Works Cited:**

1. Ashcroft, Bill (1998), "Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concept", Routledge.
2. Devi, Mahasweta (2014), "Breast Stories", Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Seagull Books.
3. Foucault, Michel (1982), "The Archaeology of Knowledge", Vintage.
4. Frye, Northrop (2001), "Anatomy of Criticism", Princeton University Press.
5. Jung, C. G (1981), "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious", Princeton University Press.
6. Lal, P. (1989), "Mahabharata" of Vyasa", Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd.
7. Prasad, Anshuman (2003), "Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement", Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Rai, Indrani Singh (Nov 10, 2016), "Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi: A Discourse of Dispossessed", Retrieved from <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/26567331/mahasweta-devis-draupadi-a-discourse-of-dispossessed>
9. Upadhyay, Pushyamitra (Nov 10, 2016), "Suno Draupadi Shastra Utha Lo, Ab Govind Na Aayenge", Retrieved from <http://www.hindisahityadarpan.in/2012/12/suno-draupadi-shastra-utha-lo-women-empower-poem.html#ixzz4POJASqfb>
10. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988), "Can the Subaltern Speak? in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture" Ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Basingstronke. MacMillan Education.

*Shankar Lal Jhanjhnodia is a Research Scholar at Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee.  
Sanjit Mishra is Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee.*