



## **Heisnam Kanhailal's *Draupadi* (2000): A Contemporary Performative Appropriation of the Women's Question**

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### **Abstract**

Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978), one that has found a place in all the major collections on women's writing in India, pitted against the Naxalite rebellion in the late 1960s in the Naxalbari area in West Bengal contextualizes and contemporizes Draupadi's public disrobing in the epic Mahabharata through the eponymous character's state-sanctioned militarized rape. The theatrical potential of the final scene was captured in 2000 by Padmabhusan Heisnam Kanhailal in his play with the same title in Manipuri language as a performative appropriation, wherein literature represents contemporary reality to voice the protest of Northeastern women enduring torture, assault and carnage by the Indian Army. Incidentally, the following events of Thangjam Manorama's rape and murder, the Meitei women's naked protest in Imphal, Irom Sharmila's fast and many others beyond the Northeast have materialised the act into action, pushing the margin to the centre of discourse on the women's question in India. The feminist translation of the Mahabharata into Mahasweta Devi's short story to the adaptation on stage performed by the ace actor Sabitri Heisnam and finally, the spiralling reality of rape raises questions on the relation between nation and gendered violence, play and protest, rape and the female body, victimhood and agency, femininity and patriarchy, power and class or caste, and ideology and practice. This paper will examine the much-contested women's question in India within a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework to review how the play *Draupadi*'s marginalized political context of the Northeast with a separatist troubled history blurs boundaries and expands into an Indian panoramic reality and inverting hegemonic paradigms and re-scripting history.

**Keywords:** women's question, state, gendered violence, rape, female body

... her wounds came from the same source as her power

- Adrienne Rich

Recently deceased Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), the renowned Bengali writer-activist, has rewritten the epic mythos of Draupadi into a moving short story titled after its eponymous character. "Draupadi" was published in *Agnigarbha* (1978) which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated into English in the collection *Breast Stories* (2010). Mahasweta Devi has championed the cause of marginalized tribal communities in her prolonged struggle by living and working with them for their economic, political and social upliftment. Her writing is a direct reflection of her activism states Radha Chakravarty in *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers*: "Mahasweta's current reputation as a writer rests largely on her own self-projection as champion of the tribal cause and decrier of class prejudice" (94). Incidentally,

Mahasweta Devi foregrounds the sufferings of the subalterns who are integral to the Indian civilization and progress and denounces their systematic marginalization in an interview with Spivak:

India makes progress, produces steel; the tribals give up their land, and receive nothing. They are suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century.... Although they fought bravely against the British, they have not been treated as part of India's freedom struggle. (*Imaginary Maps* iii)

Mahasweta Devi condemns the politics of blotting out the tribal from the Indian history of resistance and their invisibility in the nationalist discourse. Tribal women are further excluded in this discourse as they are doubly marginalized. A fresh research into her writings reveals the positionality of the tribal in the context of the nation. Particularly, the position of women in her texts demands a feminist reading of the subaltern women who can resist and 'speak' from the margin. The idealization of women as meek and possessing shame is completely reconstructed in the eponymous character Draupadi who rejects any conventional reading. Radha Chakravarty writes about Mahasweta Devi's art of reviving a myth in the contemporary context thus: "One of the most notable features of Mahasweta's writing is the visionary, utopian or myth-making impulse that acts as a counterbalance to her dystopian, 'forensic,' critical perspective on the contemporary world." (*Mahasweta Devi* 108)

The tribal Dopdi, a counterpart of Draupadi, in Mahasweta Devi's story is at the centre of the protest for the bare minimal necessities, food, and water, for survival. Dopdi Mejhen, a twenty-seven year old woman, is at the top of the wanted hit list in the Operation Bakuli. The police dossier in her name reads thus:

Dossier: Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhuma, Burdwan, Murshidabad, and Bankura. 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 draught, not surrendering those three young men to the police. (*Breast Stories* 19-20)

For this crime, Dopdi is gang-raped by the military and her husband is mercilessly killed. In this action of the state, we observe how patriarchy identifies the woman's real body and attempts to exercise control over it. The otherwise unarmed Draupadi uses her body as a weapon against her oppressors- the body is the protest, the body is the voice against violence and the vehicle of power. Here in Dopdi's rape is personal and political, sexual and social. Her body which is the object of assault turns out to be the subject of the protest, the subject which she owns and has control over. The dramatic irony of the story is heightened by the absence of a male reliever like Krishna who protected the honour of the epic Draupadi. The conversion occurs through the symbolism of how the woman's body that is desired *is* the very source of disgust and horror. Dopdi reinvents her own body in the final scene of the play once it is bereft of clothes, honour and shame. 'Yajnaseni', the other name of Draupadi, is reborn within the dramatic reality, replicating life in the most mythic sense, far superseding the epic heroine.



### **The Reality and the Play**

Kanhailal Heisnam had captured the tragic potential of Mahasweta Devi's short story and made a theatrical adaptation in the Manipuri language retaining the title *Draupadi* (2000) to represent the condition of Manipuri women. Incidentally, the autonomy over the body was exhibited by Manipuri women in a naked protest against military excess and regimentation in 2004. In a momentous incident in July 2004, a group of Manipuri women stripped their clothes before the Western Gate of Kangla, housing the 9 Sector Assam Rifles and 17 Sector Assam Rifles. The 17 Assam Rifles personnel had picked up old Thangjam Manorama from her house and shot her dead on July 11. Life imitated art! Manorama's corpse was found in a field and the autopsy revealed semen marks on her skirt suggesting rape. Local newspapers published liners such as '*Draupadi* was played out in life' after the incident. They titled Kanhailal Heisnam as *chingu* which in Manipuri language means a wise man who predicts the future.

With this occurrence, the distance between drama and reality collapsed in an unexpected way when Manipuri women in actuality acted out the final scene of *Draupadi* in the public space. The theatrical reality becomes a political reality breaking the boundary between performance and action. In Kanhailal's play Sabitri Heisnam performs a daring baring on the stage voicing a protest against the continued subjugation of women in the Northeast realizing the dramatic possibilities of Mahasweta Devi's short story and reinscribing the limits of the Indian stage. Sabitri turns her back to the audience and confronts the Senanayak by dropping the single piece of cloth thrown at her by her rapists to cover her body. The impact of this unprecedented episode on the stage is like a double-edged sword moving both the male characters on the stage as well as the audience. The sudden fear experienced by the actors on stage and the same horror realized by the audience shifts the gaze from the object to anywhere else. An interesting reversal takes place here when the audience feels a similar sense of disgust and shame like those of Draupadi's assaulters and are drawn into the vortex of the crime as the guilty. Those who came to watch the play to criticize the heinous act become a party to the offence. The performance of rape meant to cause shame to the object Draupadi is inverted in the most theatrical twist of transferring it to the violators and the audience. This performative breaks all conventional theatrical practices in the most powerful way because in the public disrobing of Draupadi, her body, the very object of desire so far, turns out to be the object of repulsion in autonomous nudity.

It is significant to note that Draupadi does not plead for our empathy and neither does she wait for a Krishna to save her. In her trauma she screams in pain but does not plead in weakness; the symbolic potential of her body is released from the socio-cultural stereotyping of being fragile and desirable to being powerful and horrific. At the end of her story Mahasweta Devi writes, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" ("*Draupadi*" 402). Sabitri Heisnam, an ace theatre personality, who is now in her 70s performed Dopdi's role and to see her subjected to militarized rape on the stage in Kolkata during the Nandikar Theatre Festival in 2014 was an unforgettable experience. The Manipuri actors wearing army green attire encircled Dopdi



stamping their boots and thumping their sticks on the floor. They used hand gestures to suggest the raising of the rifle to arrest her. Kanhailal uses symbolism with utmost deft to portray violence on the stage. Dopdi beaten to subservience, bleeding with mangled breasts, sat behind the circular platform at the centre of the stage. In the final scene Sabitri's bare body, an old woman's body symbolizing motherly affection became the source of trauma and fear. Draupadi spits blood on the Senanayak's shirt and states, "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, counter me- come on, counter me-?" ("Draupadi" 402). The play *Draupadi* indeed carves that creative space where a woman rewrites the socially inscribed meaning of her body. What stands clear from the discussion is that there are multiple images, often contradicting, and theatre offers that alternate space, open space to exhibit autonomy. To deconstruct the mass-produced signifiers of a woman's body and discover new registers, a language of her own is to further diversify the multiplicity of the images.

### **The Contemporary Women's Question**

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's "Draupadi" in *Bibidha Prabandha* (1939), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984), Shaonli Mitra's *Nathaboti Anathabot* (1990) and Suman Pokhrel's *Yajnaseni- Untold Story of Draupadi*- all these literary and theatrical productions evince the perpetual enigma and strength that the character of Draupadi has radiated through ages. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls Mahasweta Devi's story as "history imagined into fiction" since her narrative is peopled by characters who "could have existed as subalterns in a specific historical moment imagined and tested by orthodox assumptions" (*Breast Stories* 76-77). The women in the Naxalbari insurgency, the Manipuri women, and Dopdi and her compatriots in the short story represent the tribals of the past who were deprived of their land and their identity and the Draupadis of the present who are molested every now and then. The subaltern women 'speak' and resist when pushed to the margin within the narrative and theatrical reality. At the end of the story and the play, Dopdi transverses the shame from herself to her assailants and comes out as empowered in her resistance. In fact, she moves from the margin to the centre of the discourse by subverting the male gaze as the Senanayak turns away his face in shame.

It is important to connect the epical symbolism of Draupadi and Kanhailal's theatrical adaptation with the reality of women in Manipur. Irom Chanu Sharmila of Manipur popularly referred to as the Iron Lady began her fast on 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2000 and continued her hunger strike for 16 long years ending on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2016. Her protest is against the special power granted by the state to military forces since 1980. The incident that sparked her protest was the rampant shooting of ten civilians by the Assam Rifles in a bus stop in Malom village on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2000. AFSPA or the Armed Forces Special Powers Act has been repeatedly abused by the military and paramilitary forces to perpetuate violence and unleash terror among the common people, especially through the rape of women. Irom received support from human rights activists and women's groups who have been resisting the AFSPA. The state's intervention led to her arrest on the pretext of suicidal attempt and the systematic control over her body in custody through forcible feeding. Manipur lauds of a sustained history of resistance by women against state-sanctioned violence. From female-headed

households to women-led agricultural economy, Manipur presents the working class women at the helm of grass root affairs. Crime against women has been on the rise but women have continued to protest against militarization and injustice.



## **Conclusion**

The discursive context that emanated from the political tussle between colonialism and nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India needs to be assessed against the recent political developments in post-colonial times. Women became the space wherein the battle to resolve the conflict between the modernity injected by the colonizers and the tradition of the colonized was played out. The cultural imperialism established through the civilizing mission of the British in India critiqued the Indian scriptural traditions as the root cause for women's denigration in the country. The reformist agenda of nationalists had women at the centre of their discourse and they negotiated with modernity that mostly affected the upper and middle-class women. The Nupilan Wars fought by women in the Northeast are the landmarks in history that prove the role of working-class women in anti-colonial resistance. The history persisted in their resistance to revoke AFSPA and repeal the declaration on Manipur as a Disturbed Area in 1980. MNK or Manipur Nupi Kanglup was organized through a congregation that had gathered on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1980 to submit a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Manipur. Ten thousand women defied the state's order against mass gatherings and rallied on 28<sup>th</sup> May. Strong women's rights groups mushroomed in Manipur protecting the communities against state-sanctioned violence and providing shelters called Meira Shanglems. The women's question needs to be reviewed afresh because Mahasweta Devi's story in 1978 with Naxalbari as the background and Kanhailal's play in 2000 with Manipur as the political stage, Irom's fast since 2000, Thangjam Manorama's rape in 2004 followed by Meitei women's naked protest in 2004 are testimony to the fact that in the post-colonial era an inversion has materialised supplanting the coloniser by the state. Kashmir, a disputed land has faced similar militarised violence. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1991 over thirty women were subjected to rape by the Indian Army in Kunan and Poshpora, two villages in Kashmir. On the pretext of a crackdown to curb armed insurgency against Indian governance, operations involving isolation of men from the household at night and identification of insurgents were carried out in the 1990s. But in 1991 soldiers entered homes and outraged women's modesty along with the brutal beating of men. The Army denied the charges but the case has been reopened recently with activists supporting a few survivors who are seeking justice.

The elderly Ima's (mother) nude protest in Manipur had compelled the state to act but a committee's recommendation to repeal the AFSPA was not endorsed. The bodies of care transiently turned to bodies of horror and forced the state to be on a back foot. Collectively and individually, women have transformed themselves from victims to survivors. Patriarchal valour associated with war and state-induced violence has had women as the site of abuse when their bodies become a symbol of powerlessness. The continual fight of Manipuri women has inverted this power struggle threatening the patriarchal normalisation of women as weak bodies having shame. Women have taken agency over their bodies and have used it to retaliate with anger, creating new meaning by tapping their potential. Women in Imphal had started a relay hunger strike as a part of the Save Sharmila Campaign on 10<sup>th</sup> December

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2008 creating pressure on the state to repeal AFSPA. Irom's fast for 16 years positions her as a representative of collective trauma, one who has exhibited her will and agency in her self-determined suffering. Though her body becomes a social body that is subjected to the state's gaze and control, yet her body in performance poses a threat to the state's authority. The question that disturbs the sustained struggle in the recent past is- should Irom's withdrawal from fast, attempt at entering into politics and her marriage be read as recoil? The women's question from the epic, the short story, the play *Draupadi* to the reality persists in a dialectical relation with the state's action/inaction even in the present.



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