



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. 2., 2015



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

REIMAGINING DRAUPADI IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

My paper aims to explore how the mythical character of Draupadi has become the vortex of much critical deliberation. The new significations of the character have become relevant for gender and subaltern politics and issues of nationalism. My paper is an exposition of just the same through examination of Draupadi in the television epic Mahabharat, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and recent naked protest by Manipuri women. The ideological implications in the texts and popular practices is what my paper seeks to foreground.

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Any engagement with the *Mahabharat* even in contemporary times has always evoked critical response. The richness of the text lies in the fact that it has nurtured the literary imagination of a nation by opening itself up to reinventions and reinterpretations; it has also become the site of emergence of critical discourse and contestation of critical ideas whether it be that of nationalism, gender/subaltern identity, popular culture vis-a-vis mainstream culture etc. The denseness of the text has at the same time rendered itself susceptible to appropriation and misappropriation by different ideological groups.

My paper intends to focus on the mythological character of Draupadi with reference to the 'vastraharan' episode through retellings in the form of select texts and performances to underline the mechanism of knowledge production and consumption that is associated in each of these reworking of Draupadi. I chose for this purpose B.R. Chopra's treatment of Draupadi's disrobing scene, Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi", and Naked Protest by women in recent times. My aim would be to interrogate the larger problematics of power and its production of gendered subjectivities and how some of these posit a subversive reading of the same.

To begin, B.R. Chopra's television serial *Mahabharat* came at an important historical juncture when the cult of the mother goddess was gradually getting displaced by a male centric cultural locus deliberately created to reinforce a certain notion of Hindutva ideology. B.R. Chopra's treatment of the epic was aligned with the dominant cultural assumptions of power and hence necessitated a production that was a skewed version of certain episodes and characters like that of Draupadi and the episode of Draupadi's 'vastraharan'.

In the original text, Draupadi's declaration 'I am a wife and yet without Husbands' is a scathing attack on a gendered economy premised upon the domination over woman bodies and sexualities that render a woman invisible. The cultural production of gender in patriarchy thrives by inscribing notions of 'wifeness', 'motherhood' that processes the female body into a feminine one. The constitutive knowledge of the gendered subject in turn determine women's inferior social position. Draupadi's victimisation at the hands of

men who pawn her as a stake is an attestation to the historical subalternity of Indian women and feeds into the Marxist conceptualization of women as a 'sexual class'. Therefore Draupadi an elite by caste and a subaltern by class cannot escape the meaning of being a woman. The subversive text in the above mentioned statement is what makes Draupadi enduring, particularly the strong realization of her victimisation.

B.R. Chopra chooses to completely gloss over the nuances and moral ambiguity of the original and immortalizes Draupadi in public memory in terms of the space given to Draupadi's hysteria and her otherwise impotent rage. In the TV version as Suddhabrata Sen Gupta in his article 'Sexual Politics of Television Mythology' has argued, B.R. Chopra has carefully scripted Draupadi's rant to negate any subversion of the status quo. The indictment of the men is there but their guilt is rationalized as a failure to protect honour as she is the 'maryada' of the family, the daughter-in-law of a powerful clan rather than her being a woman.

The rationale being that any woman without Draupadi's attribute can be bartered or any harassment of the average woman stand justified. Mr. Sen Gupta while analyzing the gender politics in the episode draws out a dichotomy between "Draupadi (who) is a special woman as against Draupadi the woman extremely vulnerable"(p,2560). Mahasweta Devi rightly appropriates the latter, in the character of a Santhali tribal woman as the eponymous heroine of her story "Draupadi" (1981). The reincarnation of Draupadi as Dopdi in a different historical epoch, in the hand of a female author evinces new interest. Mahasweta Devi's text aims at understanding oppression, injustice of the gendered subaltern (a tribal lower caste woman) and is a definite intervention / or resistance in response to women's embodiment.

The story is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite revolt of the late 1960s that began in West Bengal. The revolutionaries were lower caste peasants who fought against the feudal landlords and their oppressive feudal laws. Often the feudal regimes were complicit with the hegemonic project of the modern state. The imperative of nationalism required a totalizing discourse of modern historiography that repressed any dissent. In the ensuing conflict, as in Mahasweta's story the women become only a trope of this power struggle. Draupadi and her husband Dulna are underground rebels and become prime targets of the state. Dulna is caught and killed and Draupadi is finally "apprehended". At the biddings of the Senanayak "Make her, Do the needful"(p,401) Draupadi is brutally raped by the Senanayak's men. However Senanayak is confronted with the unspeakable when Draupadi refuses to clothe the violence that her injured body bears witness to. In the menacing confrontation, she spits a bloody gob at Senanayak's white shirt and says "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put any cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me – Come on, counter me - ?"(p,402).

By writing the feminine sexual experience of rape into her story Mahasweta reinscribes subjectivity and agency to the rape survivor. To the Senanayak, her disobedience is a tougher challenge as he is unable to reconcile the deviance from normative femininity as when Draupadi refuses to comply with the discourse of shame. The deviant frustrates legibility of the state agent by becoming unknowable / uninterpretable. The binaries of victim and agent stand inverted as when "for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (p,109). Draupadi's raped body as an allegory interfuses the community of tribals and the category of women (caste women) and their vulnerability to such disciplinary violence. As Spivak notes in her commentary on "Draupadi"

It is when Draupadi crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful 'subject', whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object... she is in a place where she will finally act for herself (p,168).

Chronologically Mahasweta's "Draupadi" serves as an important inter text to situate the radical protest in July 2004 by a group of Meitei women who staged a naked protest at Kangla, Manipur, where Assam Rifles was stationed. The women were protesting the custodial rape and death of Thangjam Manorama. This spectacle of willful nudity was flashed all over world media and Manipur became the centre of political deliberation. According to press reports, the women conceded only after an Assam Rifles officer pleaded with them to put on their clothes with hands joined in supplication. This performance by 'Manorama's Mothers' lends to the Draupadi text a new signification in a political framework of counterinsurgency and the Indian state.

The political protest by the Meitei women carrying banner like "Indian Army Rape Us", "'Indian Army Take Our flesh" is far removed from the aestheticized women's bodies doing the rounds in mass media. As Deepti Misri in her article "'Are you a man?" Performing Naked protest in India' argues:

In the Meitei protest, the women's age, combined with their affective register of rage, as well as their ironic invitation to be raped, explicitly contested the visual language of availability through which naked women's bodies are often commodified in the popular media.(p, 617)

It not just problematised male gaze in relation to women's bodies but within the larger paraphernalia of violence by the state, such a protest deconstructed violability as a marker of victimhood. Their protest turned vulnerability into sites of power. This in turn produces a new cultural script which debunks the existing gender binary of vulnerable women and aggressive men. Although the protest targeted the Indian state and its perpetration of violence and called for an accountability of the same, the militant nature of the protest in fact called for a revision of gender so much so to destabilize State mechanism of dominance and the gendered violence that coincides in the Arm Forces Special Powers Act.

Thus my paper was an attempt to map the trajectory of Draupadi the 'woman' to Draupadi the 'average woman' who eventually transfigures as a signifier. It arrived at the same by recontextualising Draupadi in texts and performances in order to bring out the resignification along with the heterogeneity of the 'Draupadi' question with respect to different ideological appropriation.

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