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Unveiling Gender Constructs and Body Politics in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the character of Dopdi Mejhen from Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" to explore the territory of women's subjective identity as opposed to the social definition of 'woman'. This research work includes feminist and existentialist arguments to draw attention to women's existence as 'series' in reference to their separate settings. Additionally, it studies the close relation between gender-based violence and female identity through critical feminist discourse analysis and trauma studies. Incorporating a great deal of literary text analysis and interpretation for contextualization, this paper is a critical analysis of women's individual identity formation outside the repressive social norms. Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Draupadi, Gender identity, Women, Feminism, Gender-based violence, Iris Marion Young, Simone De Beauvoir, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gender normativity, Female identity, Feminist discourse, Trauma.

***Index Terms* –Women, identity, feminism, trauma,formatting,style,styling,insert.**

I. INTRODUCTION

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 17-18). This celebrated remark becomes pertinent when the question of female identity is pondered upon. The general notion is that the biological determinant 'sex' and the social construct 'gender' are interchangeable. Its dichotomous nature risks binarization of the world, consisting of only women and men. Therefore, the common idea does not consider the concept of 'gender identity', an individual's sense of gender.

Phallocentric power dynamics have ingrained a gender hierarchy where men are held as the central component of every social organization. This perpetuates several detrimental social occurrences. Such as gender stereotypes and roles that perceive men as the heads of every system and the decision-makers for women, including in reproductive choices. Consequently, the social devaluation of women and economic disparities increase, where female homemakers are looked down upon for not having employment while being restricted from procuring a job. Even if they are employed, they face insurmountable pay gaps based on gender. Moreover, women experience the perils of objectification and domestic violence, which reinforce male dominance and female subordination.

Through the lens of intersectionality, one's social identity has a great influence on their understanding of gender. For instance, in the short story "Breast Giver" (1997), the protagonist

Jashoda, becomes a professional mother due to her weak economic status. Her profession eases the lives of the affluent Haldar women who wish to get rid of the tedious task of child-rearing, thereby

keeping their bodies attractive for their husbands' gaze. Jashoda's financial instability subjects her to class discrimination, while, despite being the breadwinner of the family, she considers her husband her God. This servile attitude underscores the prevailing ideology of male supremacy.

Socioeconomic inequality makes motherhood a choice only for wealthy Haldar women, while it remains a necessity for Jashoda. Besides, her abandonment by both the Haldars and her own family speaks volumes of how privilege works in identity formation. Our existence is unique and a subject of our circumstances. As Merleau-Ponty explains in his Phenomenology of Perception (1945) that our actions in life are influenced by our sociohistorical situation. This is why there is a disagreement between the social definition of 'woman' and the reality of an individual who identifies as a woman.

The dictatorial order tends to group and 'Other' women as a category by various means, such as the "assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradiction," (Mohanty, 1984-1991, p.55) as well as by associating women with particular behavioral attributes i.e. politeness, accommodating, nurturing etc. The general belief of women as a homogenous group disregards their existence as individuals in relation to their circumstances. Therefore, "it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency." (Mohanty, 1984-1991, p.72) More often than not, these categorizations are based on women's anatomical differences in their bodies. This purports that women worldwide, despite their varying situations, are, in fact, under the control of male domination due to evident physiological distinctions. This seemingly superficial differentiation between women and men results in gender inequality, subsequently leading to the psychological imprisonment of women. Women are expected to internalize these characteristics to be accepted by society, functioning as the system of 'Panopticism', "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (Foucault, 1975, p. 201)

The social expectations compel women to walk on eggshells, to stay uptight and on perpetual alert. A single wrong step can render them unfit for the community, making them answerable to patriarchal standards and sanctions. An instance is found in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) where Ammu is put on trial by patriarchy for her independent decisions in life. Initially, her abusive childhood compels her to get married for a possible escape. But her misfortune leads her to another life-threatening relationship with her alcoholic husband. Her decision to divorce is perceived as disgraceful, as it leaves her a single mother of twins. Additionally, she falls in love with an untouchable, Velutha, against the customs. In the end, her own brother throws her out of the house. Ammu pays the price of being a woman of her own by her solitary death, away from her family. She remains misunderstood because she never corresponds to the social model of 'woman'. The moment women assert their individuality by breaking free from the social definition of 'woman', they are meted out with violence specifically created for their body. It is the ultimate weapon to neutralize any growing faction among women against the oppressive society.

Gender inequality is inevitably followed by Gender-based violence which is, according to the United States Agency for International Development, violence that targets individuals for their biological sex and gender identity. This includes all forms of physical and psychological domination, e.g., rape, honor killings, infanticide, violation of fundamental rights, economic deprivation, and so on. In Urvashi Butalia's The Other Side of Silence (1998), it is documented that around 75,000 women were kidnapped and raped by men during partition. Survivors such as Gurmeet Singh and Bir Bahadur Singh provide accounts that serve as evidence against genderbased violence under the garb of protecting the honor (of the women as well as of the religion). They confessed to the killing of the women by the men of the same community to prevent

them from falling into the hands of men from other communities. The family members, along with the renowned contemporary news outlet, addressed the murdered females as "martyred". This is a prime example of gender inequality where the men decided to annihilate the girls and also had the opportunity to euphemize their criminal act.

Is their action not equally wrong as the rape of Sakina by the men who claimed to be the protectors in Manto's "Open It"? In both cases, women are put into a secondary position and considered powerless because of their physiology. This twisted psychology promotes the notion of women's bodies being the bearer of society's honor and, therefore, a site of battle amongst heterogenous men. This reflects a methodical elimination of women from the sociohistorical setup. In Mohanty's words, "Women are taken as a unified "powerless" group prior to the analysis in question." (1984-1991, p. 59) They are declared a liability, a victim, and an object to protect even before examining their position in history. "Women and girls are most at risk and most affected by GBV" (USAID 2013). Hence, the terms 'violence against women' and 'gender-based violence' are often used interchangeably.

The gender hierarchy manifests itself specifically in female psychology. As Beauvoir expatiates, "It is difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature." (1949, p. 35) Therefore, the shame attached to rape, abortion, and infertility systematically weighs down on women. An illustration of this can be found in The Other Side of Silence (1998), where Butalia documents that 90 women from the village Thoa Khalsa drowned themselves in a well. Their decision to commit suicide had its roots embedded deeper than what is generally known as honor. Women are made aware that once their body is violated, they become an object of shame to their family, mostly to the male members. Perhaps the mutilated female bodies stand as a site of lost battle among patriarchal communities, which are better removed from their line of vision. Nurturing this orthodox belief causes women to become both victims and perpetrators of patriarchy. Socially conditioned women, such as Pooro's mother from Pinjar (1950), refuse to extend their hands to helpless yet hopeful victims like Pooro.

The power relation operates in an unfathomable depth. On the one hand, society glorifies women as goddesses and nurturers who must be protected; on the other hand, it condemns those who deviate from this goddess image by choice and convenience. Women are blamed for their independent actions, reactions, and inactions that withstand societal norms. Thus, society continuously choke-holds women to bind them as an impotent group, even before considering their socio-economic position. The underlying motive is to prevent them from realizing or proclaiming their independent gender identity.

However, identity is a site of gender struggle and realization of self. It is a psychological phenomenon interconnected with one's individual circumstances. In accordance with Third Wave Feminism's emphasis, it is evident that women differ based on race, class, ethnicity, nationality and religion. For example, a woman from the Western world, such as Tess of Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891), may enjoy racial privileges in their community, while a woman of color, like Fatou from The Embassy of Cambodia (2013), can become a subject of racial discrimination. Similarly, a woman with a financially stable background, such as Clarissa Dalloway from Mrs. Dalloway (1925) or even Ammu from The God of Small Things (1997), may have different life choices compared to women of the working class, like Sonia Marmeladov of Crime and Punishment (1866), or Jashoda of Breast Stories (1997).

Despite the diverse nature of their existence in relation to their position against the geographical, political, economic, and socio-cultural scenarios, sexism views women as a homogenous group. However, their homogeneity lies not in socially constructed gender but in the suffering due to hegemonic

discourses—gender normativity and gender-based violence. As Iris Marion Young propounds in Intersecting Voices, women make "series" rather than groups, "a series is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others." (1997, p. 23) Society tends to overlook women's plurality in an attempt to condition them, trying to bind them as a group based on sex. Factors such as racism, classism, casteism, ableness, gender, sexual orientation, colonialism, and imperialism don't seem to play any role. Therefore, the hegemonic discourse dictates rules and retribution aligned with their sex.

Mahasweta Devi, one of the most prominent Indian authors, an activist, and a journalist, presents the vortex of psychological and physical oppression in her phenomenal works, which stand as mirrors reflecting society. Devi's works mainly focus on women from marginalized communities in India during British colonialism. Her meticulous research and understanding of deep-rooted power inequality in social order and the countless exploitations of the marginalized by the autocratic patriarchal society are conspicuously present in each of her works. Having lived among the inspirations of her tales, she paid no regard to any euphemism in her fiction. They are rather facts wrapped with her proficiency in storytelling. She blatantly details the despotism practiced by upper-caste rulers on those beneath them due to class division. She sheds light on the brutal sexual and economic exploitation of tribal women, which intensified their misery. Her illustrious characters live among us, connecting us with a sense of camaraderie. They struggle to their last breath, consequently winning in death instead of accepting defeat in life.

Devi's female protagonists are poignant and inspirational. They subvert the social setup challenging the monolithic society. Women written by Devi refuse to accept subordinated existence; they reject being docile or put into a secondary position because of their gender. As opposed to gender prejudice, Devi's women fight for prominence because they are aware of their gender identity. Whether it is Sujata from Mother of 1084, Dhouli, Shanchari, Josmina or Chinta from Outcast, or Gangor from Behind the Bodice all these women battle against never-ending sexism, classism, casteism, forced labor, poverty, prostitution, and more. Devi challenges the power dynamics based on anatomical differences as well as completely refutes the social description of 'woman' through her female protagonists. They are the embodiment of resilience and courage, retaliating the repressive power while avowing their selfhood. They claim their equality by confrontation instead of giving up.

One of the key characteristics of Devi's women is that they do not conform to societal norms. Neither corporally nor mentally do they ever yield to the mainstream ideologies. Devi emphasizes the importance of breaking free from psychological barriers to become aware of self and to establish an individual identity. Therefore, women must emerge from the jail in their minds, constructed by the rigid society, to identify as women who do not comply with suffocating, subordinating, and discriminatory conventions. Only then can they become independent individuals.

This particular psychological triumph of identity proclamation is demonstrated through the eminent woman Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" from Breast Stories (1997), translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Dopdi Mejhen falls prey to the perverse and selfish trap of social order; however, she stands in stark contrast with the prescribed image of a 'woman' by patriarchy. Dopdi's protest with her "mangled breasts" (1997, p. 37) serves as a counter-argument against gender normativity. This paper analyzes the character Dopdi Mejhen in light of two specific questions: Is identity a matter of comprehension and acceptance in the individual's psyche rather than bodily conformity to customs and rules? And how does Dopdi successfully emerge as an independent woman? To find the answers, this

article closely reads and interprets Dopdi's verbal and body language as a pronouncement of her gender identity.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs several theoretical frameworks to discern gender constructs, body politics, and gender identity formation. Through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's transnational feminist lens, the essay argues that women are not a homogenous group anchored in their biological similarities. Instead, they are distinctive and contrasting on many grounds. This argument is further supported by Iris Marion Young's concept of gender as seriality, an intersectional approach that proposes that women are a series passively unified through their actions and experiences due to their position as 'women' caused by social constructs.

Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist stance, the article presents how women are considered as the 'Other' in relation to men. However, women are independent beings in relation to their environment. Therefore, gender identity is a psychological phenomenon that is grasped mentally. Lastly, critical feminist discourse analysis is used to study Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" to understand the way women's personal sense of identity challenges power relations and prejudices against them.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology focusing on literary analysis and feminist criticism to inspect the influences of patriarchal standards on the formation of female identity and body politics. The hegemonic discourse endeavors to set up rules of masculinity and femininity as determinants of gender for individuals. In Linda Nicholson's words, this is referred to as "the coatrack view" of gender, where the body is interpreted as a coat rack on which the masculine and feminine coats of gender are hung. To put it simply, bodies become the sole determinant of one's identity. This dichotomy results in the marginalization of women, reducing them to mere sexual beings within an androcentric context. Consequently, women are robbed of their diversity as individuals.

An interdisciplinary approach is utilized, incorporating Trauma studies alongside Gender studies, to inspect Devi's "Draupadi" and various other literary texts. This approach aims to provide an extensive understanding of gender-based violence, a nuanced comprehension of the heterogeneity of women, and their struggle for self-identity. The research paper specifically deals with women's independent identity formation, realization, and recognition against the backdrop of mental confinement by patriarchy with an interpretive analysis of Dopdi Mejhen's speech and bodily responses depicting her assertion of her identity as a woman.

Transcending Fear and Shame with Dopdi

"Draupadi" is a metanarrative portraying the survival of a tribal woman set against the historical background of the Naxalite movement in 1967. The protagonist, Dopdi, counters the marginalization imposed on her by social and patriarchal hegemony. Being a woman, a widow, a Santhal, poor, and a rebel, she becomes a subaltern at the hands of a lecherous community. She resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, "for if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in Shadow compared to her male counterpart." (1988, p. 287) In the story, she is portrayed as the "most notorious female" who has been wanted by the police and eventually apprehended by them under the instructions of "Mr Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics." (Devi, 1997, p. 21)

Throughout the story, Dopdi defies the socially arranged characteristics of femininity, reminding everyone that she does not need to acquiesce to any set of hegemonic rules to be considered a woman. She rejects any illusion of gender normativity which expounds that women and men congenitally bear various essential and accidental features that ascertain their gender. The significance given to the term 'chastity', 'purity', and 'impurity' are correlated with women's bodies. Therefore, the dominant narrative attempts to psychologically cripple them by declaring their bodies as the sole objects of their identity. Should something happen to it, should women fail to guard their bodies from any man's touch other than their designated partner, they will be considered some kind of faulty piece, a used object no longer to be accepted by a man. If accepted, then the generosity of that man would be thanked. Depending on this derogatory thought process, from childhood, women are taught to be ashamed to death if their body is violated. Unfortunately, not because it causes trauma for being wronged. In Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, a new approach is mentioned stating that "Trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradiction of experience and language." (Balaev, 2014, p. 07, as cited in Vitthal Borse and Chatterjee, 2022, p. 56) Put simply, trauma as an experience exceeds language. One struggles with words to express their traumatic experience, only to realize the vast distance between one's lived experience and language's capability to discern its magnitude. Traumatic memories become entrenched in the unconscious mind as unresolved issues that are beyond one's conscious control. This explains Sakina's unfortunate and involuntary response to hearing the triggering phrase "Open it!" by the doctor.

As a consequence of the patriarchal belief of 'female body' and 'female identity' as interconvertible terms, physical violence against women has reached unbelievable heights in terms of rape, honor killings, suicide, and many more. Rape, in particular, has become a weapon designed specifically to establish the superiority of masculinity over women. However, the first instance of Dopdi's defiance of social conditioning is when her iron-will is expressed through her determination to bite her tongue off if she is ever captured by the police. "If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue." (Devi, 1997, p. 28) Here, Dopdi is seen as being more worried about the revolution and the protection of her peers than herself. Suicide does not cross her mind out of shame for being physically violated. She accepts it as a part of the encounter, considering her female body. Rather, she is ready to give up her life to save their cause. At this point, Dopdi asserts her independence by choosing the reason behind her death and, simultaneously, breaking free from the social conditioning. To break it down, she comprehends her identity as a woman in her psyche dissociated from her flesh.

The tribal pronunciation of the Sanskrit name Draupadi as Dopdi is another way of individuating herself. She shares a sense of camaraderie with the mythical Draupadi due to their similar fate as women. Nonetheless, Devi draws a distinct line between them, denoting Dopdi's socioeconomic position by not providing any male support for her. According to Spivak, in the epic, male glory is manifested via Draupadi's dependence on many men; she was rescued by Lord Krishna in the "Book of the Assembly Hall," and later the Pandavas avenged their wife's insult as well as her public humiliation in Kurukshetra War. However, in Devi's story, there is no man at Dopdi's rescue. Mahasweta Devi's unromanticized retelling of the "Sabha Parva" represents Dopdi being stripped naked by men as though retribution by the law to a rebel. But her insistence on remaining naked is what indicates that "this is the place where male leadership stops." (Devi, 1997, p. 11) In other words, from here, she acts for herself as a woman, her subjective identity demonstrating her acceptance of being a woman from within. Dopdi not only advocates for women as marginalized beings, but she as a Santhal, becomes an agent for the marginalized classes within India, specifically for women from the marginalized classes. In most cases, the voices of women from socially excluded groups get buried by classism and sexism.

"Make her. Do the needful" (Devi, 1997, p. 34), the order released by Senanayak, is not only bureaucratic but also depraved. It is a testimonial of his belief in male superiority and his agreement in relegating women's identity to their bodies only. Hence, assaulting her body would mean assaulting her belief in self and her reliance on herself, destroying her as a woman. "Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many?" (Devi, 1997, p. 35) Dopdi's rape is an act of corruption that "could only happen to a woman". (Devi, 1997, p. 11) Nonetheless, Dopdi annihilates Senanayak's anticipation of triumph by going against the stereotypical assumption of a woman's reaction after being raped. Thereby vanquishing the psychological apprehension and mortification which Senanayak hoped to thrust upon her. Dopdi becomes her own rescuer by fighting off their attempt to clothe her. The renunciation of clothes is her renunciation of social conditioning and the authority to move everything according to their will. She tore the piece of fabric, which can be interpreted as her ripping apart the patriarchal rule that dared to strip her and then tried to drape her back because they preferred it. She refuses to bestow her identity on her corporeal existence; rather, her 'self' is formed by her indomitable spirit. She denies the remorse imposed on her via the medium of physical violence. Thus, she turns down gender conformity.

"You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Devi, 1997, p. 36) When she is expected to be cowering away in dread–the cage normative values construct in mind–Dopdi counterattacks by exhibiting under broad daylight the sin performed on her body. Thus, she breaks the orthodox notions and becomes an independent woman. She retains autonomy, her gender identity by choosing not to hide her mutilated body, by meeting the criminals in the eyes and telling them that she is not afraid of them, "There isn't a man here I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me," (Devi, 1997, p. 36) Dopdi's endurance is revered and her resistance is inspirational. She calls to mind the valorous Mallika, from Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution" (1988), who makes her body an agency to combat the evil-doers whose greedy eyes fall on her very physique, who consider her weak because she is a woman by physiology. What these diabolic forces fail to understand is women such as Dopdi, Mallika, are free of patriarchal fetters internally. They are independent women because they do not abide by domineering and discriminatory norms.

Conclusion

"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, 1997, p. 37), Dopdi overturns the matrix. She prevails against the phallocentric world. Dopdi marks her subjectivity by employing her body as a weapon to attack Senanayak. The law protectors assumed they would mutilate Dopdi's honor, self-esteem, determination, willpower, and spirit by feasting on her body. Senanayak's terrified expression is obvious because it is beyond his imagination that a woman can detach her consciousness of self from her body. "Ironically, animalistic brutality, when perpetrated by men, is often legitimized and vindicated, but her animalistic behavior becomes "irrational" because it disrupts conventional feminine traits of victimhood." (Silva, 2018, p. 59) By rejecting traditional gender norms and reclaiming agency over her body, Dopdi emerges as an independent woman. Her identity as a woman comes from a deeper understanding of her being in relation to her circumstances and acceptance of that self in her psyche.

Women like Dopdi are fortifications against the onslaught of honor killing and suicide out of shame post-sexual assault, as they defy the role of victimhood. While not every woman may possess Dopdi's resilience, it is imperative that they seek proper medical assistance to overcome trauma and pursue justice. In doing so, they prioritize life over guilt-stricken unfair death and empower themselves.

This topic traverses several disciplines, encompassing feminist discourse, existentialism, phenomenology, trauma studies, gender studies, and history. This work strives to decolonize women's

psychology of identity-making from the manifold manipulation and subjugation conducted by the male-dominated society. The strength of this research lies in the coherent presentation of the structured marginalization of women based on sex and how they can successfully emerge as independent individuals.

However, this paper does consider one's physical and psychological limitations to combat hardships. Hence, it does not claim to dictate an infallible method of overcoming somatic and mental trauma to distinguish identity. Instead, it intends to serve as an inspiration, advice, and even urge women to apprehend and assert their subjective identity.

In this respect, the topic encourages future research addressing trauma, gender identity, the female body, and agency, as well as feminist discourse analysis, to confront and question patriarchal oppression. Therefore, this contributes to the ongoing conversation about gender studies and its advancement.

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