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Moving Past Victimhood: Women's Bodies as Sites of Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and Medha Deshmukh Bhaskaran's Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan

Kasis Shaw
Department of Languages, PG English Area
JAIN (Deemed-to-be University)

Abstract- I examine the ways in which women in Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' and Medha Deshmukh Bhaskaran's 'Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan' express agency and resistance. These women defy the stereotype that women are passive within patriarchal systems. Here, I analyze the way these women challenge oppressive structures of power in relation to Bhaskaran's use of Medha Deshmukh Bhaskaran's 'Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan' and Mahasweta Devi's use of 'Draupadi'. Within 'Draupadi', Dopdi Mejhen refuses to accept the expected response of shame in response to her sexual violation by the state. 'Queen Tara' takes the form of Maratha queen, Tarabai, and challenges patriarchal structures by using her political judgment and military skill to lead her army against invaders. Using Spivak's critique of subalterns and Butler's concept of gender performativity, I argue that 'Draupadi' shows the conditions which must be present for a woman to be politically visible and active. Although 'Draupadi' demonstrates an extreme and immediate response to state power, and 'Queen Tara' shows an institutional and more deliberate response to state power, neither of these women can be represented simply as 'empowering' as both are products of an unequal system which provides very little opportunity for women's voice to be heard.

Keywords- feminist literary criticism, female agency, embodiment, resistance, subalternity, gender performativity, Mahasweta Devi, Tarabai

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature traditionally depicts women in two ways: as victims or as agents. Women in literature, especially patriarchal literature, are defined by their male relations. They may be wife, daughter, mother, lover, or plaything of the male protagonist. In these texts, women's power and resistance is expressed through silence, speech, bodily refusal, or organized political activity. They may also occupy positions of leadership and authority. Women's resistance can be shaped by particular historical and social conditions. Literature has the potential to depict women's agency in ways that challenge, critique and extend beyond the limits of patriarchy.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and Medha Deshmukh Bhaskaran's *Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan* offer different perspectives on women's power. Devi's story follows Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman involved in a revolutionary movement, who is captured and sexually assaulted by state forces. In contrast to most portrayals of female victims of sexual violence, Dopdi Mejhen does not seek restoration of her honor through concealment or silence. Instead, she refuses to cover up or hide her body. She shows her exposed body, wounds and scars to Senanayak, the military officer in charge of her captors. Tara, Bhaskaran's portrayal of Maratha queen, Tarabai, leads the resistance against the Mughals during the Deccan wars. Tara is defined as a widow queen who, according to the publisher, leads the resistance against Aurangzeb using innovative and unexpected means (Penguin Random House India).

These texts should not be equated as similar accounts of women's experiences. Dopdi, a subaltern tribal woman, is subjected to violence by the state. Tara is a woman of royal descent and, as such, is empowered to influence political and military affairs.

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It is important to compare Dopdi and Tara on these grounds. I would suggest that these texts also represent alternative means of expressing women's agency and power. Dopdi uses her physical body to refuse and defy the state's violence. Tara, on the other hand, expresses her agency in making judgements, taking action and being a leader. As such, resistance is influenced by one's class, community and geographic location. Dopdi, Tara, and other women's refusal to abide by certain social expectations is shaped by, and constrained by, the resources and power available to them.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

I will focus on three aspects in this paper. First, the portrayal of the female body in relation to political and social authority. Second, how Dopdi and Tara refuse the identity assigned to them by institutions of power. Third, how their comparison sheds light on the interplay between gender, class, and potential agency.

This paper will use various close reading techniques informed by feminist literary criticism, coupled with historical contextualisation, to examine the characterization of the body, distribution of authority and the role of the individual in collective action. To explore "Draupadi", I will refer to the English translation by Spivak in Breast Stories. To analyze 'Queen Tara', I will use the available critical and historical accounts on Tarabai and the published novel itself. Page-specific references to Bhaskaran's novel are not reproduced in this analysis. No dialogue has been verified to be reproduced here.

Theoretical Framework: Gender, Embodiment and Agency

According to Simone de Beauvoir, one becomes a woman, meaning femininity is culturally constructed and historically defined. I will refer to "Draupadi" using Spivak's English translation as included in Breast Stories. The analysis of 'Queen Tara' is largely based on the published novel and historical and critical accounts on Tarabai. Page-specific references to Bhaskaran's novel are not reproduced in this analysis. Dialogue has not been verified to be reproduced here. In "Draupadi", the body of the protagonist is interpreted by both her peers and the institutions which maintain the social order. Both Dopdi and Tara challenge social norms through their actions. The body, like most of reality, is socialized.

The body is the medium through which social power is practiced and maintained. Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity states that gender identities are not given by nature but are created through repetition of certain actions and behaviors. In Gender Trouble, Butler states that people can use repetitious behaviors to perform acts that can destabilize or subvert gender norms. Repetition can create the impression of a fixed gender identity. For example, a woman can intentionally behave in a manner that contradicts the expectation of modesty and dependence on a male. Dopdi's final act of refusal to perform the ritualistic shame her captors expect is particularly poignant. Similarly, Tara's assumption of the roles of a general and strategist, also challenges the idea that military and political leadership is exclusively a male domain.

Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" offers a necessary caution against treating all female resistance as equally audible or politically recognised. Within the confines of patriarchal representations, resistance can be spoken of but not in the interest of the women themselves. Dopdi's position within a revolutionary movement, as a woman of tribal origin, is situated within multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. The focus of the feminist analysis should not simply be on whether Dopdi expresses resistance, but also on how the institutions within which she is situated, attempt to define and categorise her. Tara's royal status offers her a greater level of political visibility in comparison to Dopdi. A comparative feminist approach would examine both types of resistance, along with the reasons why some forms of resistance are more recognizable and audible than others.

Dopdi Mejhen: The Body as a Refusal of State Power

In "Draupadi", Devi places the female body as the centerpiece of state authority and subaltern resistance. Dopdi Mejhen is not presented as an individual with private, domestic difficulties. Her

involvement in a revolution exposes her to the interest of the state and makes her a target for reprisal. She participates in subversive activities against the state and is, consequently, treated as a threat to state power. State power, therefore, seeks to reinstate and extend its control by attacking her. She becomes the object of state violence as well as of sexual violence. Violence and abuse against women, in this case, is politically and socially motivated to punish and discourage women who transgress the bounds of gender specific behaviour. The title of the story "Draupadi" alludes to the epic the Mahabharata, specifically to the disrobing of Draupadi. In the story, Draupadi is humiliated by being publicly disrobed. In Devi's story, the female protagonist, Dopdi, is subjected to state violence and sexual abuse, and her body is displayed publicly, as was the body of the epic figure. Unlike the epic figure, Dopdi is not rescued by any divine intervention. The story exposes the gap between idealised views on the protection of women's dignity, as represented by the epic figure, and the vulnerability of marginalized women. No male or divine intervention is forthcoming to restore the dignity of the modern tribal woman as represented by Dopdi.

The sexual violence committed against Dopdi is institutionalized power. Her captors attempt to make her body evidence of their dominance. Rape serves as punishment and intimidation. It also works as a mechanism of coercion to induce submission. It is not peripheral to the political dispute; on the contrary, it expresses state power and authority. The story does not separate the public sphere of rebellion from the private sphere of women's bodies. Rather, it represents political domination as embodied in women's bodies.

Dopdi's refusal to hide herself, and her refusal to take on the shame that her captors expect her to experience, reverses the victim-authoritative relation. Instead of complying with their expectations, she turns to Senanayak, the officer in charge of the operation against her. This refusal does not remove her suffering or the violence done to her, but it deprives the perpetrators of the right to define the meaning of what has transpired. Through her refusal, she challenges the authorities who used her body as a means of punishment.

This act of resistance cannot be equated to empowerment. It is misleading to suggest that through violence and trauma, Dopdi gained empowerment. Her resistance lies in her failure to accept the societal script which dictates that she must accept humiliation and disgrace. Through her refusal, she exposes the moral and political vulnerability of the state, as represented by the officer. No matter how much armed force he commands, she is confronted by a single woman who refuses to act as the subject of his defeated nation.

Spivak focuses on the subaltern, representation and voice in her reading of "Draupadi". Her reading suggests that to understand Dopdi's agency, one must examine the narrative frameworks through which the readers encounter her. To the state, Dopdi's body is merely an object to be controlled. However, in this scene, Dopdi's last act of agency disrupts the state's control over her body. Readers must come to terms with the complexity of recognizing agency of a subaltern character, especially, when that character's experience is heavily mediated by powerful institutions and further complicated by the literary representation of that experience.

Thus Dopdi's resistance is physical and combative. It is embodied. It is also localized. Although her body continues to be used by the state to illustrate its authority, Dopdi achieves a momentary disruption in the expected performance of submission. Thus, her body is no longer a canvas on which the state can write its authority. It also becomes the medium through which she defies the state's authority.

Tara: Political Authority and the Reorganisation of Power

Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan provides an alternative means of female agency and resistance to those examined previously. In her historical novel, Bhaskaran revisits the story of Maratha queen Tarabai, who resisted the Mughal invasions of the Deccan. The publisher of the novel describes Tarabai

as a courageous woman who galvanized resistance against imperial power and developed unconventional strategies to defend her people (Penguin Random House India). In this fictional work, Bhaskaran portrays a woman within the world of political and military leadership, traditionally represented as masculine.

The real-life Tarabai was one of the major leaders of the resistance against the Mughals, and as described by historian Richard M. Eaton, became Maratha's sovereign after the death of her husband, Rajaram. Eaton's account shows that during this time Maratha politics underwent significant changes and that Tarabai was seen as the leader of the Marathas. Eaton argues that during this period, Maratha state and society underwent several changes, including those in leadership and political authority (Eaton). Thus, a female character, Tarabai, having political authority in the literature, is completely appropriate and historically accurate.

Unlike Dopdi, Tara's agency is achieved through access to positions of power. She is, however, still constrained by the patriarchy. Her political and military influence derives from her dynastic, gendered role, as the legitimacy of female rule is questioned. She is ultimately able to exert influence on military and political decisions and mobilize people to her cause.

Her authority is situated within a dynastic, gendered, political hierarchy which is continually negotiated. The novel depicts Tara as developing strategic judgment, which is especially important in a feminist reading. It is reported that in her youth Tara was encouraged to learn horse riding and the use of weapons, which are typically the skills of a male heir (Chhabria). Clearly, there is no biological basis for restricting leadership and military skills to a particular gender. Tara's story shows that with proper instruction and expectation, women can be as effective leaders as men. The publisher's synopsis mentions that Tara is equated with the goddess Kali. Bhadra Kali is equated with courage, strength and resolution in the novel (Penguin Random House India). Kali is synonymous with strength and destruction of evil forces. Thus, the depiction of Tara as Bhadra Kali should be understood as part of a cultural tradition through which women's authority and power can be represented. This should not be interpreted as women being equated with gods.

Tara's body is not shown to have the same role as Dopdi's, as an agent of state violence. Rather, Tara's body is used to convey strength, endurance and command, in addition to movement. Tara uses the horse, the battlefield and other means of political leadership to express her agency. Women have historically been restricted from participating in the public sphere and, especially, in the military. Therefore, Tara's body takes on a public function that has been denied to women. Her actions should be viewed as a request to be allowed to participate on the same platform as men.

To adequately critique Tara's case, comparisons with other female members of the royal family must also be considered. A female member of a royal family is not comparable to the rest of the female population. Tara's agency, like other members of the Maratha royal family, is linked to political circumstance and resource availability. Tara is able to utilize institutional means of expression that a tribal woman cannot. Though her actions are commendable, they cannot be generalized to include all tribal women. Her achievement can, perhaps, more accurately be interpreted as an indication of the potential of women to influence and adapt to the political climate of the day. Comparison of Dopdi and Tara is best made through the different environments in which they are allowed agency. Dopdi is at the bottom of the power structure, and is seen by the state as an enemy. The state uses sexual violence as punishment against her for her political involvement. Tara, on the other hand, is a member of the royal structure and leads armed opposition. One is a victim of the state, the other of the Maratha Kingdom.

III. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: TWO LOCATIONS OF RESISTANCE

One's agency is contained by her incarceration, the other's is expressed in her role as a commander. The Maratha Kingdom's power structure was patriarchal, and women like Tara had to adapt to it. This suggests

that the patriarchal structure of the Maratha Kingdom did allow women some agency. While the Maratha royal family allowed women some agency, it was ultimately to serve the patriarchal structure of the Kingdom. Like other Marathas, the royals also upheld the caste system. Therefore, women of lower castes would have had less agency within the structure of the royal family. While both Dopdi and Tara express agency within different environments, Dopdi has the agency to challenge the state, and Tara the agency to challenge her oppressors. Dopdi's experience differs from Tara's in the way that the state is involved in her experience. Dopdi is treated as an enemy by the state and is punished with sexual violence for her political participation. The Maratha Kingdom also had a state structure, which would have enforced the law, but was not as dominant as the state is in Dopdi's case. Although Dopdi is forced into a state of powerlessness, Tara takes on the role of leader in armed opposition to the Maratha Kingdom. Thus, although both texts demonstrate agency within different environments, Dopdi takes on the agency to oppose the state, while Tara takes on the agency to oppose her oppressors. This suggests that some women can adopt a public role of opposition to the state, like Tara, while others are subjected to the violence of the state, like Dopdi. Both cases show women taking on roles traditionally performed by men, but both do not represent a complete challenge to patriarchal structures.

Differences lie in the way that body and authority are connected. Dopdi's body is used to represent the various forms of violence used to break her spirit. In the end, she uses her body to defy the state. She uses what are traditionally seen as gestures of defeat and submission to defy the state. In contrast, Tara's body is used to represent training, command, and movement. She shows that women can and do occupy roles within the military. This resistance breaks the definition of what is publicly accepted and associated with a woman's body.

Both texts reject expectations of women being sexually assaulted and ashamed of her body. Dopdi refuses to cover herself. She exposes the means used to enforce female modesty and shame. Tara challenges the association of masculinity with strategic intelligence, command and martial skills. She shows women can be involved in politics and as a result, challenges the assumption that males should naturally assume leadership roles in politics. Both examples demonstrate the importance of challenging socially imposed standards of femininity and masculinity.

There are differences, however, in the extent of recognition each receives. Tara, being of the royal class, is able to express her leadership in both political and historical settings. Her actions can be documented as political decisions made by a ruler. Dopdi's story is told using the language of security and insurgency, and can be viewed as the exploitation of her gender for the enjoyment of others. This is because Dopdi is a subaltern who exists within a sphere of insecurity. Spivak is correct to raise concern with the representation of the subaltern. Neither character should be reduced to a stereotype of a 'feminist hero'.

There are several differences that separate Dopdi and Tara that must be taken into account when interpreting these works. Ultimately, these differences reflect the context in which they are written, including social and historical conditions. Dopdi does not remove herself from the violence that she experiences. Neither does Tara remove herself from the dynastic structures of the state in which she operates. Both texts are concerned with agency, and illustrate how agency is conditioned and defined within the context of specific situations. These situations may encompass refusal, survival, leadership, strategy, and resistance to an assigned identity.

The comparison also makes clear that resistance need not be expressed through physical, in-your-face, acts of defiance. Dopdi's final meeting with Senanayak is clearly confrontational, however, his role as an agent of state violence, demands that Dopdi adopt a role other than that of a victim. Tara, on the other hand, acts against state violence through her use of organizational skills to manage people, resources and military strategies. Neither of the two, however, can be seen to be more feminist than the other. Their strategies and actions can be

interpreted in light of the social and political inequalities prevalent in their respective communities.

IV. CONCLUSION

The comparison of Medha Deshmukh Bhaskaran's *Queen Tara: Kali of the Deccan* and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" highlights the varied forms of female resistance. Women in both texts refuse to allow systems to define who they are and restrict their actions. Despite this, the nature of their resistance is conditioned by the inequalities inherent in their social and political situations.

Dopdi's form of resistance is personal and individual. After suffering sexual assault by the state, she refuses to perform the shame expected of her and confronts the officer, representative of the state, who is the agent of her oppression. She disrupts his authority to interpret her experience. Tara, on the other hand, resists politically and strategically. Through her leadership and organization of military forces, she contests the conviction that women are incapable of exercising sovereign authority and participating in the making of history.

As can be seen from the works of de Beauvoir, Butler and Spivak, the representation of the female body is flexible. It can be used to symbolize various social and political structures, and through it various forms of resistance to the dominant structure can be expressed.

The comparison of Dopdi and Tara also highlights different social and political contexts that condition the nature of their resistance. This comparison reveals that women, both in subaltern and dominant positions, can be agents of resistance and thereby challenge the notion that women are passive objects of power. This is in contrast to the assumption that women do not belong to the spheres of history, politics and resistance. Through the examples of Dopdi and Tara, it is evident that women can actively negotiate and resist power, and in the process, modify the structures within which they exist. It is therefore essential that feminist studies should focus on how women can be agents of resistance and transformation, and not merely objects of power. This comparison can and should be used to enrich, and not replace, more holistic studies of women in history, politics and resistance.

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