

# “Take This Slave Wench Krsna to the House!”<sup>1</sup>: Exploring Feminine Subjectivity in the Indian Context through Draupadi-Dopdi

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**Abstract** We exist through our bodies and as the materiality of our existence becomes a certainty, so are the conflicting and contradictory experiences around the body. For a woman, the body becomes a site of conflict between authorial/patriarchal dictates and the possibilities of achieving agency within the confines or limitations of discursive power. In this essay, I will be presenting a “subjected story” of a hybrid construct — “Dopdi Kuru” emanating out of Vyasa’s Draupadi Kuru and Mahasveta Devi’s Dopdi Mejhen; trying to explore how sexual politics and gender associations participate out in feminist struggles around body politics in the India. The main thrust of this paper is to highlight how sexed bodies are produced through patriarchal interventions, and how bodies become the very agency through which women embody their lived experiences. This paper doesn’t hold up the romantic illusions of auspiciousness and fulfillment circulating around a woman’s body as part of the Indian thought process; rather forces us to witness the distressing spectacle of nudity and the violence of rape, that actually threatens a woman’s body; experiences that ultimately lead her to question the very ethos of society and achieve embodiment in contradiction to the established expectations of femininity.

**Key words** Body; Draupadi; Dopdi; Embodiment; Rape.

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<sup>1</sup> van Buitenen 58. Henceforth only page numbers mentioned for quotations from van Buitenen, trans. *The Mahabharata: Selections from the Sabha Parva and Udyoga Parva*.

## Introduction

COVID 19; and one thing that singularly strikes me is the human effort to create a dialectics around this disease. We find almost everyone theorizing about the source of this ailment, trying to guess its probable cure, where not only our human experiences but also our community's concepts and beliefs are merged. As we start investigating the origin of this pandemic, or about any other social or personal issue, we see ourselves spinning out a *story*, or endorsing a particular version, felt and imagined as a part of the collective unconscious. Remembering Nietzsche we might say that the act of storytelling not only creates literature but also a performative space that generate an embodied life. Linguist Elionor Ochs and psychologist Lisa Capps felt that, "language is the greatest human resource for representing and structuring events in our lives. And no language practice has more impact in this direction than storytelling" (Capps & Ochs 13). Every culture has stories to tell, stories about its origin: stories about various customs and rituals that impress upon the human psyche. Stories spew out meanings and provide a representing and transforming space of human experiences and cultural episteme. Stories investigate into human geography and are representations of our individual and collective notions of the real—"It is not what 'really happened' but rather experiencers' theories of what happened that provide continuity between past, present, future and imagined lives" (Capps & Ochs 21). Stories are memory hordes that preserve the individual or collective consciousness to a particular event. Some may be laden with worn images or familiar incidents plucked again and again by the storyteller(s). These hackneyed renditions, built upon a known version, may be termed as the "official story" of that thing or incident. Yet some stories expose certain *obscured* enclaves or throw light to some *suppressed* pattern of thought and experience beneath the hegemonic mother story, not typically palatable to the popular imagination. Such stories—marked out by their new orientations—unravel and present what might be called with respect to a particular incident, a "subjected story." In this paper, I will be presenting a "subjected story," not of Vyasa's Draupadi Kuru and Mahasveta Devi's Dopdi Mejhen, topics that have already been explored by scholars over generations; but of "Dopdi Kuru," trying to explore how sexual politics and gender associations participate out in feminist struggles around body politics in the Indian subcontinent. This paper is not an interpretation but experimentation with a hybrid construct "Dopdi Kuru," signifying that it is Dopdi Mejhen who can be imagined raising the unsettling question—"Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (47) and flaunting her naked body as a spectacular ridicule of patriarchal authority and Dharma. The question raised is

not asked by an individual woman to her husband, rather it is a universal question that the second sex poses to us: in subjecting a woman to inhuman tortures whom we lose first—the woman who is treated as an animal or “us,” who behaves like an animal? The paper explores authority, license, and subjugation and their correlation to marginalized-women bodies asserting that the female body is the focal spot of coercion in any society, where particular identity of the self is immaterial.

### **Who's *Mahabharata*?**

*The Mahabharata* makes a spectacular claim: “What is here is nowhere else; what is not here is nowhere.” Never has any work of literature been so confident about its authoritative status, but this two thousand years old Indian epic could be, as it knew itself to be an opus not defending a closed structure, but an evolving organism in a state of constant retellings encompassing every human experience and story teller, in the scope of its evolution. Its characters still parade on our psyche and its issues still find relevance in the thinking mind. It still speaks to us with a contemporary resonance which appears to many as a “literary un-thing” (Winternitz 272), incorporating the entire flow of human experience within its elastic pattern. Y.V.Vassilkov offers a more natural way of probing the issue of genre, by looking at the *Mahabharata* as an unbroken chain of inclusion and integration which is to him the “uniqueness of this epic” (Vassilkov 225).

“This immense poem,” Jean-Claude Carriere wrote in 1985, “which flows with the majesty of a great river, carries an inexhaustible richness which defies all structural, thematic, historical or psychological analysis...Layers of ramifications, sometimes contradictory, follow up on one another and are interwoven without losing the central theme. *That theme is a threat: we live in a time of destruction—everything points in the same direction*” (qtd. in Tharoor, loc 103).

In the face of such interpretations, where we can assume that this great epic has the potential to be all things to all men; I raise the question: Who's *Mahabharata*? Looking at some of the issues cited in the epic we may conclude that the *Mahabharata* is what you can make of it, and from that perspective every individual can lay a claim to it or identify with any of the major or minor characters. My point is not to contest how the women characters have been marginalized in the seed story, rather to show that how the images and tropes in the seed story and its successive rendition by Mahasvata Devi creates a symbolically feminine body, whose story *Mahabharata* becomes. In this essay the symbolically feminine body fusing Draupadi with Dopdi creates a chronotope across time and space helping in the embodiment a post-colonial feminine self, which Anzaldua would have called “New

Mestiza,” representing the nation’s tortured body.

I use the notion of symbolically feminine from Moira Gatens’s notion of imaginary body. Gatens applies the expression “imaginary” in a “loose but nevertheless technical sense to refer to those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity. In this sense, [she is] concerned with the (often unconscious) imaginaries of a specific culture: those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment” (Gatens viii). Significantly, these metaphors and tropes of a “symbolically feminine body” are not inert or fixed, but are transmogrifying and so, are provisional (Brown 29), and that gives me a scope to experiment with the notion of Dopdi Kuru, whose story *Mahabharata* is.

### **The Woman’s Body in Society: Theoretical Framework**

The woman’s body and its emanation in physical/psychological as well as cultural/social domain is an essential point of inquiry to understand her position in Indian society. To unravel the complexities intrinsic in a multifaceted and fluid construct around the notion of the feminine self has been of growing interest in recent feminist scholarships in India.

Embodiment—the physical and mental understanding of being—is the state of possibility for us, connecting to other people and to the world. Fully capable or seriously incapacitated, it is through our physicality that we function as social beings. As Shildrick and Price points out, the concept of “being-in-the-world”—or more appropriately, becoming-in-the-world—is an expression of indissoluble bodily bias in which the “temporal and the spatial are fully operative” (Shildrick and Price 8). Moreover, the embodied subject is not an inaccessible, empirical self in relation to the world, out there, supposed as a detached entity. Contrarily, “it is the nature of the embodied subject to move into and be taken up by the world around her. Essences emerge through this intertwining, in the space between. They are enacted but always and only in relation to the world and to others” (Fielding 132). Bodies are produced across “all forms of community as a deeply-embedded social-relational category” (James qtd. in Cregan, 4).

Most interestingly the female body is viewed and produced as a contesting site of authorial power and resistance to that power. In both experiential terms, as well as in terms of an understanding and knowledge of their circumstance and the potential for struggle open to them, women in representing themselves, pay heightened attention to this aspect of their embodied selves. As Meenakshi Thapan points out:

Resistance in fact is a double edged sword in women's lives, one with which they constantly articulate and exhibit their struggle but one which does not always enable complete success. Resistance, nonetheless, remains central to their lives whether or not it achieves social transformation. ... This undeniable reality gives them a strength and dignity that is of their making, driven by their awareness and understanding, and therefore lies outside the domain of what is socially approved or normative behavior (xv).

This paper tries to project female bodies in resistance as a transgressive construct, for whom the grotesque representation of the self becomes an empowering device, destabilizing not only idealized notions about femininity; but also mocking and destroying patriarchy's pretension to the codes of chivalry. This paper shows the grotesque embodiment's potential to dismantle the overriding cultural codes.

Now I will move on to explicate my notion about the production of grotesque or deviant bodies. The body, as Mary Douglas views, is "always treated as an image of society" where "the bodily control is an expression of social control" (74). The conforming body never pose a threat to a society, whereas the grotesque body, which is "the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change" (Russo qtd. in Scura & Jones 5), constitutes a rebellion against social boundaries and regulations. In this classification of grotesque bodies, I also incorporate the nude bodies, which after being stripped or raped, refuse to be clothed and in that provide a spectacular resistance to the normative regulations of femininity.

For Foucault, the body is an over-determined site of power; its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control. Punishment is never a process to reduce crimes but a means to exercise perpetual surveillance over the members of a society. Power acts upon bodies to coerce them into submission. Foucault writes:

The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations of power and domination; but on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection. (qtd. in Haugaard 191)

Judith Butler's feels that in Foucault work, "power in his double valence of subordinating and producing remains unexplored" (Butler, *Psychic Life* 2). In order to resolve this lack Butler spins out a subversive politics which coalesces a theory of power with a theory of psychoanalysis. For Butler gendered subject is formulated through practice of subjection. The moment an individual is subject to gender norms or disciplining, she/he also emerges as a gendered subject. Foucault's account of *assujétissement* fails to show how the subject created in submission is not a determined subject, but one that can offer resistance to the very power structures that protract its continuation. Butler resolves this problem by defining gender in terms of performativity: if heterosexual gender norms have to be repeated in order to persist, then, they can be repeated differently. The notion of performativity is extremely crucial to the sociology of the body, as it helps in producing resisting bodies. In this essay I try to show how Draupadi's body in a post-colonial critical framework metamorphoses into Dopdi's body, where the body is a not only a site where regimes of patriarchal discourse and power are inscribed, but also a pre-given site of its own ostensible construction.

#### **Starting from the Beginning: Draupadi's Question in *The Mahabharata***

The basic story of the epic is about a dynastic rivalry between the Pandava and Kaurava clans, and the focus of this essay is the Hall of Dicing in *Sabha Parva*, where irked by the opulence of the Pandavas, Duryodhana invites the Pandavas to the Game of Dicing, and through the guile of Shakuni robs them of all material prosperity. Yudhisthira in the grip of dice insensibly stakes his brothers, himself, and finally his wife Draupadi: "She is not too short or too tall, not too black or too red, and her eyes are red with love—I play you for her!" (44).

After Yudisthira stakes and loses Draupadi to the Kauravas, Duryodhana orders an usher to bring Draupadi, "The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honor" (45), into the hall as a slave to the Kauravas. When the usher informs her that, "Yudhisthira, crazed by the dicing game,/Has lost you to Duryodhana" (47), Draupadi, not missing a bit, quizzes him about the details of Yudhisthira's stake, and sends back the usher with a question for Yudhisthira: "Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (47). Draupadi's question becomes the ultimate riddle that throws the entire Kuru court in a state of confusion regarding its answer. And as the elders debate, Draupadi is dragged in the court by Duhsasana. She pleads with him, and yet there is resistance in her speech: "It is now my month! / This sole garment, man of slow with. You cannot take me to the hall, you churl!" (50) But Duhsasana, retorts

back: “Sure, you be in your month, Yajnasena’s daughter, / Or wear a lone cloth, or go without one! / You’ve been won at the game and been made a slave, / And one lechers with slaves as the fancy befalls!” (50). She is brought to the court and though already shamed demands the answer to her question from the Kuru elders.

Draupadi’s question offers a resistance to unequal power relations. As she poses her question she is simultaneously accomplishing the meaning of her thought. It is not a translation of a meaning that she has already prepared in her mind, but rather her act of speaking becomes a performance that accomplishes the thought of resistance and its meaning for the self. Draupadi’s question is her thought, a behavioral process, through which she expresses her felt and even imagined need to be protected. Her question overlaps with various subtle interpretations of Dharma, which are also felt and expressed through words or lack of it. In this contest Draupadi’s question assumes meaning, only in telling it, not before.

Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* feels that Draupadi’s question was a foolish one, in the sense that:

The question Draupadi asked rested on a difficult and complicated legal point. Even Bhishma, who had often taken the part of the Pandavas in quarrels with Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, was unable to give an answer, perhaps for fear of compromising Draupadi. What Draupadi was contending was that once Dharma had become a slave he had lost his freedom and had no right to claim anything as his own; a slave has nothing he can stake. Then how could Dharma stake her freedom? Although her argument seems plausible from one point of view, even a slave has a wife, and the fact of his slavery does not destroy his authority over her. Moreover, from the most ancient times, a slave had the right to accumulate certain property that was entirely his own. The question was thus a tangled one, involving the rights of a master over a slave and a slave over his wife (98-99).

Begging to disagree with Karve, I would like to state that her question actually punctuated the patriarchal assumption to power and authority. Through her question she momentarily achieves a stalemate situation and shakes the entire socio-philosophical framework of the Aryan society dependant on the notions of Dharma, as the embedded question she poses is really cosmic in intent. Rig-vedic society produced the concept of Shanatana Dharma to elucidate what it means to be a human being at any given point of time, in accordance to a reciprocal shaping that occurs among the notion of the self and the developing constitutions of conscience and

corporeal punishment. The way a culture establishes an understanding and convention of corporeal punishment influences—and is influenced by—the constitutions of conscience and selfhood. Draupadi's question goes way deeper—is Dharma really practicable where a man fails to respect the autonomy of a woman and barter her in a game of dice to be dragged and stripped in a court of men?

Dharma is essential into human existence as an attempt to fill a hole perceived to exist given the absence of absolute meaning for suffering. It distinguishes, in other words, an attempt to import into human experience proper meaning. But if we take the notion of Dharma to be just as a legal framework of society, and fail to read between the lines, then when faced with a difficult question like Draupadi's, we fumble for an answer. Though Irwati Karve is critical of Draupadi, yet her description is crucial, which I use to prove a point totally in contradiction to her view:

Draupadi's question had put all of them in a dilemma. Bhishma hung his head. Dharma was ready to die of shame. Draupadi was standing there arguing about legal technicalities like a lady pundit when what was happening to her was so hideous that she should only have cried out for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code. Had she done so perhaps things would not have gone so far? Allowing their own daughter-in-law to be dragged before a full assembly, dishonouring a bride of their own clan in the assembly of the men, was so against all human, unwritten law, that quibbling about legal distinctions at that point was the height of pretension (99-100).

Karve's *Yuganta*, comes at a time when to be mute and conforming was considered to be prudent for a woman, and that same opinion is pushed forward to analyze and criticize Draupadi. But being way ahead into feminism and gender, I fail to agree with Karve, and rather feel that Draupadi's question blasts the empty bulwarks of patriarchal Sanatana-Dharma. In *The Law Code of Manu*, the section on "Honouring Women," Chapter 3, ll 55, clearly states, "If they desire an abundance of good fortune, fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law should revere their woman and provide them with adornments." Here we see a clear abrogation of this law code, and can howl and curse those who stake her (any woman), allow her (any woman) to be staked, drag her (any woman), and intellectualize on her state (any woman's pitiable state in society).

As the men debate on Draupadi's question, Karna snubs Vikarna, and twists Dharma to establish his point that Draupadi has been legally won, calls her a whore—"She submits to many men and assuredly is a whore!" (55); and then orders

Duhsasana to “Strip the clothes from Pandavas and Draupadi!” (55). As Draupadi’s skirt is stripped, a new skirt is replaced every time. It is perhaps not strange that later redactors felt necessary to embroider the story in this magical frame of replacing skirts, maybe to preserve the sanctity of a blood line or to garb patriarchy bestiality towards women. But reality is something that can’t be screened. And to view reality let’s turn to Dopdi : “Name Dopdi Mejhen, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankraharh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...” (Spivak 392).<sup>1</sup>

### “Draupadi” by Mahasveta Devi

This classic text by Maheswata Devi, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is an epitome of subaltern resistance, bearing a chilling testimony of Santhal Hool. But here I represent Dopdi, not as a political activist, but as doppelganger to Draupadi, breaking down the romantic illusion of the spectacle: “But when her skirt was being stripped off, lord of the people, another similar skirt appeared every time” (55), as presented in *The Mahabharata*, and exposing the raped and mutilated body of a woman. Draupadi’s rape, screened from memory and comprehension, through the enigmatic description of a continuous flow of skirts, is not so hard to “explain” away, if one wanted to—and plenty still do, as a gesture of supernatural intervention. The method conjures up the history of rape’s demonstration—which is to say rape’s history of being effaced within representation. Dopdi taps into this history of effacement, and represents for us the “missing” rape and to rape’s annoying ocular and ontological status in Indian culture.

Senanayak’s order to the soldiers, “Make her. *Do the needful*” (401), almost mimics Karna’s ordering Duhsasana, “Take this slave wench Krsna to the house!” (58), and then starts the real spectacle of brutality. It becomes immaterial whether it’s Draupadi or Dopdi—class boundaries evaporate, time frame and location dissolves; only one predominant tendency emerges: brutalizing a woman if found in a disadvantageous position. Draupadi screeches like a “winged osprey” (59) and for Dopdi, “a billion moons pass” (401). Whether it’s Draupadi in the camp, or Dopdi in the Kuru court, or whether we create a hybrid entity—Dopdi Kuru, it is immaterial. As long as a woman’s body can be ravaged, as long as she can be stripped, and her nipples bitten, patriarchy will continue to do so.

To strip and rape a woman follows a much more complicated mindset on the part of patriarchy than mere summer seeming lust. A woman’s body is obses-

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1 Henceforth just page number mentioned for Spivak’s translation of “Draupadi” by Mahasveta Devi.

sively objectified and physically persecuted, so that it may function as a fetish to alleviate the castration anxiety that threatens male hegemony. A man, out of a fear of losing his penis, creates or looks at naked women as images of sexual difference, to console himself that he is dominant, and in the heterosexual matrix he is the master and woman the object of domination, or the slave.

If Draupadi-Dopdi represents a homogenous feminine self, then Karna's dicta-  
testo Draupadi, "Come in and serve us with your attention" (61), is a foreboding to the brutal rape to which Dopdi's body is inflicted to:

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? (401)

One of the ways to discipline female bodies is to make a carnival out of it, where men will feast upon it at their pressure and leisure. Rape gets inscribed on a woman's body as a cross-cultural language of male domination and humiliation:

...crazed by his [Duryodhana] ascendancy, he took his cloth and looked invitingly at Pancali [Draupadi]. Then smiling up at Radheya, and taunting Bhima, he [Duryodhana] exposed to Draupadi who was watching him his left thigh, soft like a banana tree... (62)

The description of insult in *The Mahabharata* is followed by the ravages on Dopdi's body:

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi had passed out. (401)

The demonic Kauravas and their allies, salivating over Draupadi in the Kuru court, makes out to her, randomly, in the forests of Jharkhani:

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. (401)

Rape aids in the enunciation of a politics of feminist agency. Foucault's concept of power as a dynamic force offers insight into how the "sexed body," in particular, is the chief target of disciplinary power. The identity continuum, creating the hybrid entity of Dopdi Kuru, becomes a symbolic representation of Indian culture's tortured feminine body.

I represent Draupadi and Dopdi, not as two unique, isolated and fixed protagonists placed in two different narrative frames, but as a hybrid subject, incorporating multiple voices and negotiating multiple subjectivities. My focus is on the lived and communicative body of Draupadi and Dopdi and on lived experience as constitutive of the embodied self. By lived experience, I mean that experience which is not unique to one but experienced by both, giving birth to the sexed body of Dopdi Kuru, which leads to the articulation of their subjectivity based in the everyday social-historical locations.

Since *The Mahabharat* puts a screen to the travails of Draupadi, her state is best represented through Dopdi; in fact, after the rape, it's only the body of Dopdi Kuru that we are made to observe and feel uneasy about it: "Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (402). The proud and naked body is reminiscent of Kali, creating implications of cosmic significance, suggesting dissolution of patriarchy itself.

Most importantly the gait of Dopdi triggers the notion of the uncanny in our mind. The revival of the old and long familiar naked body of the woman, historically silenced within our culture creates a positively traumatic sensation: "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (402).

### Conclusion

The main objective of this paper is to highlight how sexed bodies are produced, and how bodies become the very agency through which women embody their lived experiences. Body is a location subject to disciplinary forces, and also a site of resistance with emancipatory possibilities. Women recognize the necessity of resistance through their bodies. In fact, acts of resistance are linked to the future tendencies towards change, though not instantaneously achieved. It is in the moment

of openness that there lies the possibility of change; in that, it is “both impossible to pass the border and necessary to transcend it” (Wang 46). It is at this point that “the edge is overrun, contradictory imperatives and opposite gestures from both sides are fully awakened and thereby bring pressure for an answer” (ibid.) The question raised by Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*, that couldn’t find a befitting answer in the Kuru court leading to her interim molestation, is effectively answered through another rhetorical question in Maheswata Devi’s story: “You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (402)

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