

## PERFORMING RESISTANCE AND RECONSTRUCTING MARGINS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*

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### ABSTRACT

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms Mahasweta Devi's fiction as "history imagined into fiction" as the characters that people her narratives "could have existed as subalterns in a specific historical moment imagined and tested by orthodox assumptions" (*Breast Stories*: 76-77). In Mahasweta's short story "Draupadi"; the title character Draupadi Mejhen or Dopdi, an active worker of the Naxalbari movement is hunted down and raped in a bid to subjugate insurgent groups. This paper's focus is on the strength of women who walked shoulder to shoulder in the insurgencies. The tribals have lost their land and their identity is trodden over; likewise the woman also is raped and humiliated. But the woman, the so called 'subaltern' can ultimately resist and 'speak' when pushed to the ultimate margin. In the final section of the story Dopdi emerges as empowered; who can challenge her assailants even when unarmed. She displays an unusual form of resistance by subverting the gaze in such a way that it is her oppressors who are made to feel the shame.

### INTRODUCTION

The Bengali writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi revisits the mythological story of Draupadi in her much acclaimed short story "Draupadi". The story was published in her work *Agnigarbha* in 1978. The English reading world got to appreciate the work through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of her collection of short stories entitled *Breast Stories* (BS 2010). The story has at its backdrop the Naxalbari movement of Bengal which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and money lenders.

Mahasweta Devi has been actively working for years for tribals and marginalized communities. Her activism effortlessly translates into her writings, endorsing this view Radha Chakravarty writes in her book *Feminism And Contemporary Women Writers* that "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"(FCWW: 94). Championing the cause of tribals in India she is particularly devoted to ensure their economic, political and social security. She is very vocal about the fact that the tribals are being pushed out of the forests; their natural habitat and source of livelihood. Denied of their contribution in

history and perceived as savage they are left out of the progress which India is making. Speaking about the plight and depravity of the tribals in an interview with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta Devi says:

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 discusses how tribal was rendered invisible in the nationalist discourse by completely erasing the various tribal rebellions from the history of resistance. Her writings call for re-examination of the tribal with a fresh insight which can lead to better understanding of their socio-political standpoint.

Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' displays two forms of resistance – first resistance is in the form of tribal insurgencies and the second is acted out by Dopdi Mejhen, an active worker of the Naxalbari movement who is hunted down and raped in a bid to subjugate insurgent groups. This paper's focus is on the strength of the women who walked shoulder to shoulder in these insurgencies. The tribals have lost their land and their identity is trodden over, likewise the woman also is raped and humiliated. But the woman, the so called 'subaltern' can ultimately resist and 'speak' when pushed to the ultimate margin. Her particular concern for women and their issues make her texts great areas of feminist research.

The resistance of Dopdi brings to mind the story of epic *Mahabharata* where Draupadi the wife of Pandavas was publicly humiliated when Yudhishtira loses her in game of chess to the Kauravas. Draupadi is in a state of seclusion and insists that she should not be taken away but is dragged to the assembly hall by her loose hair which is tantamount to rape in symbolic terms. Dushasana further goes on and attempts to strip her publicly by pulling her sari but fails to do so as the sari continues to lengthen endlessly due to the divine intervention of Lord Krishna. Draupadi vows that she will not do her hair till the time she washes her hair with the blood of Duryodhana and thus avenge the violation of her dignity. She exhibits her violated condition by displaying the unbraided hair that was an instrument of her violation. Draupadi plays a pivotal role in the epic as she is the one who was responsible for the great battle Mahabharata between Pandavas and Kauravas. Mahasweta Devi reconstructs the myth of subaltern woman as her protagonist breaks away from the shackles of false notions of shame. Appreciating Devi's skill of envisioning myth Radha Chakravarty writes: "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 Critical Perspectives: 108)

Mahashweta Devi's tribal Dopdi is fighting for her survival, for food and for water. The writer etches out the plight of the tribals in words. She depicts how utter helplessness can finally lead to resistance or even rebellion. Twenty seven year old Dopdi Mejhen is on the wanted list for her role in Operation Bakuli. She even has a police dossier:

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. (BS: 19-20)

As she is called by a policeman Dopdi is flooded by confused memories of drought in Birbhuma. There was hardly any drop of water for her and her people but there was "Unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as a crow's eye." (BS: 29) The only way out of this situation was to kill Surja Sahu. The killing was carried out by Dulna, Dopdi and other comrades. Their fight was for survival and when that is at stake than any action and every action is justified. The feudal and imperialist mindset fails to give a human character to a tribal who is perceived only as a dark bodied and wild untouchable who can't even have the right to draw water from the wells. He is the proverbial 'other' who has been given a marginalized identity by the dominant hegemonic Hindu society.

After escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner and hence they can inform their comrades about their targets. In their movement they too are soldiers, for they too are fighting for their rights. But Senanayak and other real soldiers act like hunters and the tribals are the hunted. The wild animal can easily be located and hunted down near a water hole so the "soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water" (BS: 23 ). Finally with the help of army informant Dukhiram Gharari the soldiers succeeded in locating and killing Dulna when he was drinking water lying on his stomach. But the search for Dopdi continues. All measures are taken for her entrapment. Senanayak uses the body of Dulna as bait thinking that Dopdi will surely come to take the body but she doesn't fall prey to this trap. Senanayak works by the motto of "apprehension and elimination" and like any imperialist understands (or misunderstands) that he is performing a superior duty by which the bloodshed and atrocities committed by him are justified and will be erased from the memory with passage of time. In this he not

only shares kinship with Shakespeare's Prospero but also with Conrad's Kurtz who declared "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Heart of Darkness: 50). Writing about Senanayak the villain of the story Gayatri Spivak reflects that "in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First World scholar in search of the Third World" (BS: 1).

Very soon Dopdi Mejhen is apprehended and understanding her defeat she readies herself for the next action of warning her comrades:

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far. (BS : 34)

On being 'apprehended' Senanayak wants complete submission from Dopdi and for that she is shamed to the core and turned into an object of gaze and derision. When the dinner hour approaches Senanayak walks out of the camp after ordering his men to "Make her. *Do the needful*" (BS: 35).

Senanayak's hunt this time is Dopdi (a woman); on whom he can apply the tactic of rape for 'elimination'. In a bid to subjugate her body, mind and soul Dopdi is raped repeatedly as she loses and gains consciousness during the ordeal. Her oppressors believe that this form of oppression will weaken her and will force her to name her comrades. Although scarred for life, she still possesses an indomitable spirit and thus refuses to ask for water when her throat is parched.

In the morning the time comes for Dopdi to be taken to Burra Sahib. But like Draupadi of *Mahabharata* Devi's Dopdi also refuses to abide by conventions after being humiliated and disgraced. Her defiant behaviour causes commotion in the camp. Refusing to cover herself in front of Senanayak, Dopdi tears away the sari and throws the water on the ground in a symbolic gesture. She then walks towards Senanayak with her head held high, full of anger, disdain and defiance. For once even Senanyak finds himself totally helpless in front of an "unarmed target". The situation is now beyond his comprehension and has now reached a stage from where he has to step back towards the margins:

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (BS: 37)

In the final section of the story Dopdi emerges as empowered who can challenge her assailants even when unarmed. Having nothing else to lose now she suddenly realizes the vulnerability of her oppressors and becomes the agent of justice. She exerts an unusual form of resistance and subverts the gaze in such a way that it is her oppressors who are made to feel the shame.

## CONCLUSION

Draupadi becomes a metaphor of resistance. She is representative of millions of tribal women who are fighting against oppression and who can dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy. The tribal woman is marginalized in more than one way as she lives in a constant fear of victimization. Mahasweta Devi does not romanticize the tribal woman rather her writings are so realistic that they shake each reader out of his slumber and ask for renewed understanding with regard to tribal identity and their rights. As a south Asian writer and activist Mahasweta Devi has successfully portrayed the problems of ethnic groups in her fiction.

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