

## CONFRONTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF MARGINS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on the strength of women who walked shoulder to shoulder in the Naxalbari rebellion. In one of the short stories of Mahasweta Devi *Draupadi*; the title character Draupadi Mejhen or Dopdi, an active worker of the Naxalbari movement is hunted down and raped in order to suppress insurgent groups. 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.

**Key Words:** Subaltern, Tribal, Naxalbari Movement, Identity, Victimization, Commodification, Marginalization, Resistance, Genderization.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the foremost literary personalities, a prolific and best-selling author in Bengali. She is one of those writers, in India, who have an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdog. Her powerful stories about the dispossessed along with her activism, on their behalf, have made her one of the best-known, and most frequently translated, of India's authors. Her trenchant, powerful, satiric fiction has won her recognition in the form of 'Sahitya Academy' and 'Jnanpith Award', the highest literary prize in India, in 1996. A social activist, she has spent many years crusading for the rights of the tribal and was also awarded the Padmasree and the Magsaysay, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, in 1997, for her activist work amongst dispossessed tribal communities. She transforms her stirring tales into drama for it provides an easy access to a larger illiterate audience who live away from the mainstream world. Her creative work – fiction and drama – has been characterized by a flair for authentic documentation of the spirit and passions of the time without any touch of sentimental romanticism.

Being a writer with a social cause, her stories and novels are a caustic comment on India as a nation and the socio-political trajectory of the country which has happened since independence. She writes about the lives of ordinary men and women, particular about subaltern consciousness. Her stories, including *Draupadi*, and specially her *Palamau Stories* give voice to tribal – Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas and the junction of folk and the modern, the mainstream and the margin, colonialism and post-colonialism. Her stories and novels are deeply rooted in her own experiences with the people about whom she writes. Her writing reflects her deep familiarity with the Santhal, Kheria and Lodha tribes. From her many stories and novels, as well as articles, essays and reports, we learn how difficult it is for tribal people to gain the facilities and privileges taken for granted in the mainstream society. Mahasweta Devi is one of those rare writers who always aspire to find and explore something challenging and new, and never accept the existing ideals.

The major event that occurred after she had become a professional writer, in the late sixties and early seventies, was the Naxalite uprising which seemed to have exerted a tremendous influence on her writing. Surprisingly, unlike the other peasant movement which was led almost by middle class leadership from Calcutta, this movement sparked off in the Naxalbari area and was led by the unexpected coalition of the peasants and the intellectuals. The target of these movements was the long established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law. Inspired by the historical events, Mahasweta Devi has written innumerable stories depicting the factors that led to the rebellion and the casualties due to the brutal suppression of the movement.

*Draupadi*, which was published in her work *Agnigarbhain* 1978 is one of them. Later it was translated in English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's collection of short stories entitled *Breast Stories*. 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. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha*, a collection of her long stories which are related to the great Naxalite uprising, she writes: *The economic gains that the country has achieved since*

*Independence have not benefited the middle classes, the workers and the agricultural laborers. The rich have become richer; a brutally complacent and ignorant richer class has come into being. . . . Those who possessed small plots of land have been compelled to give up their last scraps to the jotedars and moneylender . . . while nobody heeds to their claims to the right to survive, the hirelings of the affluent middle class and the idle rich weave narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature. (vii)*

Mahasweta Devi discusses how tribal was left 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 rebellions 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 conquer rebellious groups. This paper focuses on the strength of the women who walked shoulder to shoulder in these rebellions. The tribal have lost their land and their identity is trampled over. Same is with the woman also. She is raped and humiliated and degraded into a mere non entity by the so called masters of the society. But the woman, the so called 'subaltern' can ultimately resist and 'speak' when pushed to the ultimate margin. Devi's particular concern for women and their issues make her texts great areas of feminist research. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, throughout Mahasweta Devi's varied fiction, have opined that *Women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of caste and class. But in the best of her writing the quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situations she depicts* (235).

Mahasweta Devi has written about the oppressed in the feudal system as well as in the capitalistic system which retains still the essence of the feudal exploitative modes. She has portrayed the plight of women in these systems. Her story *Draupadi* lays bare the miseries of urban women in a capitalistic society. A society in which a woman has been reduced to commodity in the wake of consumerist culture. As keen observers of history, if we analyze the writings of Devi, we have a feeling whether it may be Bengal or any other part of the country, the situation of the oppressed and violence meted out to women throughout India remains the same: "*The continuation of sexual assault of feudal-patriarchal society in the form of state violence is the experience of contemporary feudal society*" (Jyothi and Katayani 127).

As we undertake an intensive analysis of the story we see that Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a multi-nuanced narrative, capturing the life and times of its protagonist Dopdi, a Santhal tribal, at the intersection of modern develop mentalist state and subsistent subaltern survival. It raises the issues of class, caste and colonialism, and their collusion in the formation of hegemonic patriarchal nation state and how this mainstream formation maintains itself through violent 'othering' of the margins, negotiating various ideological locations: the cultural pressures of her community, the exigencies of naxalite activism, and the onslaught of state.

*Draupadi* is one of Devi's most famous stories, and has been reprinted and translated in several collections. Like most of her stories, it is also set among the tribal of Bengal. *Draupadi*, or Dopdi as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel, hunted down by the government in their attempt to subjugate these groups. The government uses all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder, and rape, and any tribal deaths in custody are invariably 'accidents'. But *Draupadi* is not easily cowed. But at the end she is betrayed by her companions who catch her and after many days of rape and abuse, deprived of food and water, the story ends with a magnificent final scene in which she faces her abusers, naked and bloody, but fiercely strong.

It is a story of victimization of a woman who dares to confront the oppressive system. It narrates the predicament of a tribal woman who caught between the pulls of subsistence living and the appropriator's logic of feudalistic modernist patriarchal state and its allied system. *Draupadi*, on the surface, seems to tell a familiar tale from the most revered Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. *Draupadi* in the epic, the most celebrated heroine married to the five sons of impotent Pandu, provides an *example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India* (Spivak xiii). She is a gifted woman who is protected from an insult to her chastity. The incarnate Krishna provides her clothes when younger brother of the enemy chief attempts to pull at her sari. Spivak further observes that *Draupadi's legitimized pluralisation (as a wife among husbands) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory (xiii). But she could not be stripped to shamelessness for the idea of Sustaining Law rises to her rescue in the shape of Krishna* (Satyanarayana 178).

On the contrary, the episode retold is a telling commentary on the present social system which is bent on getting rid of all those persons who defy its insensitive ethics. In fact Devi brings legends, mythical figures, and happenings into contemporary setting in order to capture the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination. She herself asserts: *It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to present times and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and Puranas interesting* (Ghosh 93).

Dopdi Mejhen, the protagonist in the story, is a naxalites' informer-activist and a Santhal. She is a part of a revolutionary group, working under the leadership of urban guerillas. The innocent tribal woman grows into a hardcore rebel and becomes notorious in the circles of the privileged, long before the story begins. But this does not happen suddenly in her case. She has been witness to the death of Bashai Tudu and her own husband, Dulna Mejhi. As soon as Bashai Tudu is killed, Dulna and Dopdi decide to continue the struggle. Strengthened by the support from the couple, the masses begin to demand wages from the landlords. Irrked by the unusual situation, the landowners decide to suppress the revolt. Thus, she, along with her husband Dulna, rebels against the oppressive state – feudal nexus. In the time of drought, Surja Sahu – the feudal kingpin of the area in connivance with the state – get two tube-wells and three wells dug within the compound of his two houses. When the whole Birbhum is reeling under famine, he and his ilk refuse to let tribal share their 'unlimited' water sources. This instigates the ire of the suffering tribal which leads them to join the naxalites group, headed by Arijit, and culminate in the 'revenge-killing' of Surja Sahu and his sons: *Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhum . . . and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous operation 'Bakuli', when three villages were cordoned off and machine - gunned, they too lay in the ground, faking dead. In fact they were the main criminals. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper caste wells during the drought, not surrendering those three men to the police. In the morning at the time of body count, the couple could not be found. The blood sugar of captain . . . rose once.* (Sivasankri 102)

Thus, Dopdi and Dulna have escaped throwing dust in the army's eyes into "Neanderthal darkness" for a long time. Working in different guises with different landowners in and around Jharkhani belt, they, completely sacrificing their family and desires, dedicate themselves to the cause of movement and the social utopia and economic freedom it promised. Their dedication and their ability to survive create a terror among moneylenders, landlords, grain brokers etc. In order to suppress the Naxalite movement and contain the deviance inherent in it, the state launches 'Operation Jharkhani', initially under Arjan Singh and then under Senanayak, *a specialist in combat and extreme left politics*(103). He firmly believes that in order to destroy the enemy, you should become one of them. In this way you can understand them (theoretically) properly.

The dehumanized act of elimination which the privileged resort with tacit support of the people in power has only aggravated the situation further, resulting in a senseless orgy of murders, assaults, counter-assaults and sadistic tortures. Besides the ghost of betrayal is always at work – it has been active since time immemorial in the history of oppression of man by man. Having been informed, the army enters in the forest, and shoots Dulna Mejhi. Thus, Senanayak – exploiting every means at his command, i.e. experience, power, cunning, as well as theory and, the colonial strategy of divide and rule – is able to entrap and counter Dulna. Dulna could not survive this dastardly onslaught and fails to match Senanayak's cunningness and betrayed by his own people, he is entrapped while drinking water and 'countered': Finally, the impenetrable forest of Jharkhani is *surrounded by real soldiers; the army enters and splits the battlefield. Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water, they are still guarding, still looking. On one such search, army informant Dukhiram Gharari saw a young Santhal man lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. The soldiers shot him as he lay. As the .303 threw him off spread-eagled and brought a bloody foam to his mouth, he roared "Ma-ho" And then went limp. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Mejhi.* (104)

Since then, Dopdi Mejhen is on the 'most wanted' list of the police and is living life incognito. It is at this stage that the story begins. So far she has proved a match for Senanayak's cunning and has eluded his grasp. To entrap Dopdi, he uses her own folk, men like Shomai, Budhna and Dukhiram Gharari, whom he had earlier used to destroy Dulna Mejhi. What is more shocking is that the corpse of Dulna Mejhi is used as a bait to attract more rebels.

The soldiers get going his commands. But none comes to claim Dulna's corpse. The method of trapping adopted by the representatives of the civilized society symbolizes the degeneration of a man into a cold-blooded man hunter. But neither the fear of tortures nor the loss of life stops the committed persons, like Dopdi, from fighting for the common good. She holds the fort after Dulna's killing. In fact his death seems to have given a new direction to her struggle. So, she learns to be bold. Her activities cause a war scare among the army persons.

Having found that it is not easy to dispatch the persons who are good at using primitive weapons, the army sets trap at every bend of the falls where Dopdi and her followers are expected. Consequently, every village *where the hungry and naked are still defiant and irrepressible.* (105), has become a target of the enemy. Dopdi, however, is an embodiment of resilience and is a great survivor. She combines in herself the sense of pride that derives from her illustrious lineage with the practical survival tips of the naxalites to frustrate Senanayak's designs. A daughter of Champabhumi, she is proud of her lineage, her pure unadulterated black blood. She is proud of her forefathers who had fought for and guarded their women's blood and honour and saved it from being contaminated by foreign invaders. She despises the betrayers of her husband as a blot on community. Senanayak's apparent failure to trap Dopdi, however hardens his resolve to 'capture' her, dead or alive. Dopdi is aware of the risks that surround her life in the wake of the reward put on her head, and willfully toughens herself, physically, emotionally and mentally, for any eventuality and the torture it might entail. She follows

Arijit's advice in a letter and spirit, not only to save her 'self' but also to keep her comrades out of trouble. She tells Mushai and his wife who know about her incognito existence as Upi Mejhen, to deny any acquaintance with her in case of her capture. This is a poignant gesture wherewith she ensures that her destiny may not recoil on her sympathizers. She realizes that she is particularly vulnerable to various methods of torture that can be met out to women. She is also aware that it is possible that she could be raped and being made to betray villagers who are supporting her with food and information: *Dopdi thought of something. Then said, go home. I don't know what will happen; if they catch me don't know me. Can't you run away? No. Tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will counter me. Let them. Mushai's wife said, we have nowhere else to go. Dopdi said softly, I won't tell anyone's name.* (106)

Dopdi is not afraid of being caught or encountered. Though the idea of independence posits India as a cultural mosaic, the whole sequence, seen from author's perspective, seems to reduce this plurality into a sharp divide between the ruler and the ruled, and between the oppressor and the oppressed. Dopdi is not only marked as a deviant in a social sense but is also a deviant in terms of the socially accepted norms of being a woman. Thus she is suggested as a semiotic deviation as she is described as a most notorious female. This is so because of her daringness to challenge, and teasingly elude the patriarchal order.

She almost outwits Senanayak in his man oeuvres, but not for long. Caught between the diverse pulls of her culture and the demands of the ideology she aligns with her group men in order to survive and fight oppression, she traverses a delicate balance between one patriarchal ethos (i.e., the 'affirmative' values of her Champabhumi) and the other (i.e., the 'negative' and (mis)appropriatory of the feudalistic – modernist state). While the former sustains her and gives strength to her conviction, the latter threatens to annihilate her body and soul. Her psycho - physical process of toughening herself for any eventuality - despite her resilience within hardships - is premised on a keen awareness of the vulnerability of her gendered sexuality. This is apparent from the following extract: *Come what may, she will prefer to bite off her tongue than to articulate anything*(106). She is equally aware of the vulnerability of her sex, but despite all this knowledge, she is not ready to utter a word and destroy others' life for her survival. But these precautions don't prove resistant. Like Dulna, her own people ultimately undo her: *As she walked thinking these thoughts, Dopdi heard someone calling, Dopdi! She didn't respond. She doesn't respond if called by her own name. Here her name is Upi Mejhen. . . . Dopdi's blood was the pure unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi. From Champa to Bakuli the rise and set of a million moons. The blood could have been contaminated; Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women's blood with the poison of black kunch. Shomai and Budhna are half-breeds. The fruits of the war. Contributions to Radhabhumi by the American soldiers stationed at Shinandanga. Otherwise crow would eat crow's flesh before Santhal would betray Santhal.* (107)

However, before being captured, she makes a last ditch effort to evade her captors and sound her comrades as to the impending danger. With her spreading arms, with face towards the sky, she turns towards the forest ululating with the force of her entire being. She is successful in sending the message to her comrades to change their hideouts.

The apprehension of Dopdi Mejhen, in fact, sets going the story. And what happens to Dopdi hereafter gives it a new dimension. With her capture, the process of commodification of her body starts. She is no more treated as an activist with a cause but a mere body, a possession or war booty. For the feudal-modernist masculine agency – Dopdi and her body – symbolizes a site of its enemy's pride and honour. It is only through the annihilation of this body that the enemy can be vanquished and one's manhood retrieved.

Mahasweta's sympathetic description of the incident has been charged with a sense of authenticity. Apprehended at 6.57 p.m., Dopdi is taken to camp. For two hours no one touches her and she is allowed to sit on a stool. But before going for his dinner, Senanayak, issues orders to his men – of course after her 'official interrogation' – to *Make her and Do the needful* (109). This obviously entails unmaking of her as an activist revolutionary and remaking of her as a victim body, through a vicious cycle of multiple rapes. Tied to the four posts with gag in her mouth, she is repeatedly assaulted by a number of cops, till she passes out. Despite this *seemingly billion lunar years long physical and mental assault*(109), she is determined not to give up and utter the word 'water' even when she is extremely thirsty. On this inhumanity and cruelty, E. Satyanarayana observes: *The barbarous attack on her chastity is not only a sign of insult to the dignity of an individual but also a threat to the human values. Ironically Senanayak and his subjects appear to have surpassed their counterparts in the epic. Draupadi symbolizes jagruthi (awareness) in Nara's (man's) journey of self conquest. Besides she represents the nucleus of energy. In the epic, the enemy's attempt to strip Draupadi is rendered useless by the miracles of incarnate Krishna. In the life of contemporary Draupadi, no intervention of any such benign and divine comrade is awaited. And in the situation where the comparison between the characters in both, the epic and the story ceases to be relevant.* (Satyanarayana 182)

In the morning, when Dopdi is brought to the tent and given cloth to cover her body, she refuses to clothe herself. She becomes defiant: *Dopdi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, she's gone crazy, and runs for the orders. He can*

*lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior.*(Sivasankri 109-110)

With her uncovered wounded body, she prepares to go to Senanayak's tent. The guards on duty think that she has gone crazy. They don't know what to do. So they rush to their master for orders. Senanayak too is surprised to see naked Dopdi walking towards him with her head high. Dopdi comes closer to him. She is not at all shy or ashamed of her nakedness. She rather laughs at Senanayak when he enquires about her clothes. In a sharp, terrifying sky-splitting voice she questions his manhood. She is not ashamed of her position; rather she makes him ashamed of his manliness. She seems to communicate him that a woman may be molested physically but cannot be vanquished mentally:*The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Dopdi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind. What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Dopdi's black body comes even closer. Dopdi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Dopdi 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?*(110)

The spontaneity with which Dopdi reacts is in fact one of the essential elements of the revolutionary project that Mahasweta Devi conceives. What a woman considers sacred and important in her life is plundered. So there is nothing more that she is scared about. Decided to be naked at her own insistence, Dopdi says: *There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed, I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me-? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.* (110)

Dopdi's inexorable faith in human dignity creates panic among the army men. In fact it cuts like a knife deep into the veil of civilization which Senanayak and his men are proud of, and expose the primitive roots of being. Mahasweta wrenches Draupadi out of her myth, and, by superimposing it onto Dopdi, inserts her myth into history. This superimposition is, in fact, a calculated violence against the significances of mythical tale, so that what was conventionally thought to embody suppression turns into a tool of gender empowerment. Mahasweta describes her *modus operandi* thus: *It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present times and following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and 'puranas' interesting, I use them with new interpretations* (Untapped Resources 17).

Mahasweta, as is evident from Dopdi's transcendence from the sense of bodily shame and her ultimate defiance of Senanayak, uses Dopdi as a trope with subversive overtones. The author transforms the mythological into a tribal Dopdi, the agent of a potential unmaking of gender and class containment. In this sense, although the narrative ends in, *the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law* (Spivak xii). Dopdi remains unconquered. And her defiance is not only an act of militant spontaneity but an infallible challenge to the male-dominated world.

*Devi's Dopdi is a "Simhavahini" - an ancient goddess who sits on the lion to kill the demons. Dopdi's mangled body emerges as a potent sign with a plethora of meanings with alternative texts for the subaltern woman, who dares to speak with her body. While the mythical Draupadi in The Mahabharata is saved from public humiliation by the timely intervention of Lord Krishna, Mahasweta's Dopdi lives in a world where there is no miracle to save her. So she has to become an agent of her own deliverance. Senanayak's fear and perplexity at the end of the story is a classic example of the most powerful form of resistance which cause a rupture in the hegemonic discourse. Her final resistance brings about an entire paradigm shift. Unlike the classical Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi emerges from Agnigarbha- the womb of fire.*(Rose 101)

There is no doubt that this story is a hard hitting comment on the grim situation of the tribal and marginalized in the face of democracy. Mahasweta Devi's wrath falls on the perpetrators of injustice for the poor which has reduced the world to a hunting ground. The poor and the subaltern who are the real owner of natural resources as well as their products are denied even a human existence. The condition of women in the present patriarchal society remains the same irrespective of time and place. *Male chauvinism and economic hegemony have always subjected a woman to suffering and inferior status. Once the writer chooses to address himself to the basic issues plaguing the society, he becomes universal by cutting across the barriers of time and space. So Devi is as much relevant to us as she is to the oppressed women of West Bengal*(Jyothi and Katyayani 132).

Drawing on subaltern women's experiences she reconstructs them to reflect on the politics of subalterization, genderization and marginalization. She refuses to use the public distinction in unproblematic way; she rather incorporates the political issues of gender and sexuality while narrating her woman-centric ideas. 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. In conclusion it can be said that whatever be the region- rural or urban, the plight of woman remains the same. Male chauvinism and economic hegemony have always subjected a woman to suffering and inferior status.

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