

## **Resurrecting Subaltern History- Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi":**

### **A Mythical Study in Translation**

**Anita Goswami**

**Ph.D. Scholar (UGC NET JRF)**

**Central University of Rajasthan**

**India**

#### **Abstract:**

Stories travel from culture to culture and their transmission through translation takes innumerable forms. Translation into English sometimes acts as an instrument of empowerment of the marginalized sections of society- dalits, tribals, women-giving writers who deal with the struggle of the disenfranchised in society greater visibility and creating solidarities across the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Indian society. Foremost among such writers in India is, of course Mahasweta Devi, who has been well served by her translators in English. The present paper aims to analyze the contours of Mahasweta Devi's intervention into history that seemingly springs from her subalternist project. Her texts produce a deconstructive, counter-historical discourse that aims at centering the hitherto historical margins by; re-examining the dominant nationalist history and exposing its elitist bias by focusing attention on the neglected and marginalized locations.

Mahasweta's texts undertake a contrapuntal reading of the mythical discourse and write back to the nationalist mythologizing of a monolithic, integrated Indian culture at the cost of oppressing the low castes, and tribals. Her stories, like "Draupadi", "Breast giver"-engage with the Indian epic tradition as crystallized in the Ramayana and Mahabharata in an innovative way. Dopadi, in her story, "Draupadi" is a revised and demythicised incarnation of the epical Draupadi, who belongs to the Santhal tribe. In her reincarnation, she is placed within contemporary historical context, where her present status is described to be that of an activist in the naxalite movement of the seventies. This article would be focusing on how Mahasweta's Dopadi ironically reverses the

signs of the semiotics of the epic to produce a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare among the male hegemonic power structures.

**Key words: history, subaltern, deconstruction, strategies socio-political power structure.**

### **Introduction**

Stories travel from culture to culture and their transmission through translation takes innumerable forms. Translation into English sometimes acts as an instrument of empowerment of the marginalized sections of society- dalits, tribals, women-giving writers who deal with the struggle of the disenfranchised in society greater visibility and creating solidarities across the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Indian society. Foremost among such writers in India is, of course Mahasweta Devi, who has been well served by her translators in English. The present paper aims to analyze the contours of Mahasweta Devi's intervention into history that seemingly springs from her subalternist project. Being a social activist Mahasweta Devi writes about the lives of ordinary men, women, particularly Adivasi (tribal) people like the Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars, and Mundas, and other topics of social and political relevance. She also has spent many years crusading for the rights of the tribals.

Mahasweta's fiction, pitch forked into international limelight by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak through her short stories entitled "Breast Stories" sets different standards of aesthetics –standards which are counter canonical and almost anti-literary. Spivak, in her essays has created a critical discourse around Mahasweta Devi from the postcolonial subaltern perspective. Spivak's critique emerges as a means of both understanding and combating the oppression of such indigenous people to whom she refers to as the "subaltern" and the "forth world". Spivak theorizes the characters of the tribal men and women in Mahasweta's texts as "subaltern". Paralleling the postcolonial, post-feminist agenda of decolonizing the tradition, religion, ethics and every other hierarchical institution Mahasweta inscribes a new sexual/textual praxis in her narratives of the tribal, dalit women who undergoes double colonization due to her ethnic/caste/class identity and her gender.

### **Subaltern**

The term 'subaltern' owes its origin to Antonio Gramsci's Writings and underlines a subordinate position in terms of class, caste, race, and culture. It was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1985)

'Subaltern' and 'Feminist' histories, among others, constitute some of the dominant historiographical positions that deconstruct the mainstream to decentre it and reinvest the historical space with the voices of the marginals.

Colin Mac Cabe in forward to *In Other Worlds* comments on the articulation of gender in Mahsweta's texts:

"The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in its grounding in the gendered subaltern's body, in that female body which is never questioned and only exploited. The bodies of Jashoda and Dopdi figure forth the unutterable ugliness and cruelty which cooks in Third World kitchen to produce the First world feast that we daily enjoy."

The sensitivity and ironic intensity of Mahasweta's idiom multiples manifold when she documents the tensions and struggles in the lives of the gendered subaltern. Devi does not treat gender, class and race as analogous narratives; she rather takes them as interpenetrative ones. The co- editors of *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalithanote:

"Throughout Mahasweta Devi's varied fiction women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppression of caste and class. But in the best of her writing she quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, cast, and gender in the specific situations she depicts."

The present paper will analyze Mahasweta's "Draupadi" where a Santhal tribe woman fought for the rights of her community. This paper would critique the life of the tribal Dopdi and the mythic Draupadi of the Mahabharata as both seem to have struggled for their legitimate rights, snatched by the establishment throughout their life.

Mahasweta intervenes into the cultural history of the nation by countervailing the mythical givens. Myth as a source and vehicle of hegemonic control, serves to contain and condition the responses of the marginalized 'other'. Mahasweta's history of the subaltern comes forth in the form of a counter dialogue against the oppressively hegemonic *Itihas Puranic* history of India.

Her texts demolish the dominant symbol/myths embodied in the cultural-histories texts like Vedas, Puranas, and *Ramayana and Mahabharata*. In “Untapped Resources”, she writes:

“It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and Puranas interesting; I use them with a new interpretation.” (UR17)

### **Peering history through myth**

Devi intervenes into the Brahminical history by appropriating and re-deploying the mythical narratives. The pre-historic narrative given are re-constructed and refurbished from the perspective of the suppressed voices. Myths, in her texts, signify a site of cultural contest over discourse between the center and the margin. Perhaps by using the myth, Mahasweta devi is showing the continuity of exploitation from the days of the Mahabharata to the present times. Her de-mythification of the patriarchal myths betrays her desire to create a gender neutral national culture space. Instead of opting for the passive mythical investment of women in the figures of Sati, Savitri etc. She resurrects and reinvents active mythical figures like Draupadi, Shakti. Mahasweta sees in these mythical figures a potential for nationalist reorientation. She posits the tribals, dalits and women not as passive subjects but as active agents of thenation’s cultural and political ethos. Instead of demolishing the myths per se she engages with these deconstructive manners, so as to consciously recast them into vehicles of empowerment and affirmative episteme.

Her stories, like “Draupadi”, “Breast Giver”, engage with the Indian epic tradition as crystallized in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in an innovative way. Through these stories, Mahasweta subverts the Hindu nationalists’ attempt to “brahmanize” two-thousand year old narrative tradition. Mahasweta’s stories are counter hegemonic as these reveal the history of repression/violence written within the mythical narratives.

Referring to her re-construction of subaltern history by creating an alternate mythical discourse, Radha Chakravorty writes:

“One of the most notable features of Mahasweta Devi’s writings is the visionary, utopia or myth-making impulse that acts

as a counterbalance to her dystopian, “forensic”, critical perspective on the contemporary world.”(RMSF 69)

Summing up Mahasweta’s engagement with myths, Maitreya Ghatak writes:

“whether it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher share of the crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, they remain the hallmark of her fiction especially the little known, little landed struggles which are part of everyday life and don’t necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media”. (Ghatak, 2000, p.10-11)

The lives of poor peasants, tribes, their rebellions, their requirements and their pains never find any mention in mainstream history books. Through her literary endeavors, Mahasweta attempts to give them a voice because she believes that their voice should be heard.

Dopdi, in her story “Draupadi” is a revised and demythicised incarnation of the epic Draupadi who belongs to the Santhal tribe. In her reincarnation, she is placed within contemporary historical contexts where her ancestry is traced to Champabhumi of Bengal and her present status is described to be that of an activist in the naxalite movement of the seventies, in the area of the northern part of West Bengal, a fugitive on the run from the police. Dopdi is a gendered subaltern. As a woman belonging to the lowest of the low economic class, she is subjected to double subalternization. Her subaltern status is further compounded by the grotesque workings of her caste.

Mahasweta, once again, inverts and revises the legacy of cultural nationalism by reinterpreting the story of the most powerful female character of Mahabharata, Draupadi, in her story “Draupadi”. She displaces Draupadi from her place in royal kingdom to put her into the forest area of the Jharkhand belt as a tribal woman. Mahasweta reinterprets the story of Draupadi’s disrobing, one of the famous episodes of this cultural religious text. Unlike her mythological namesake, Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi gets disrobed in the dark, dreaded, wild world of a forest where no divine male power comes to her rescue. She is in a place and situation where she must act for herself. Force, physical violence, verbal abuse and other forms of aggression have always been used to control women’s bodies and gain their obedience. It is always ‘the female body’ which is both the object of desire and the subject of control. Dopdi, as she is apprehended,

tortured, gangraped, brutalized all through the night, neither expects nor receives salvation from any quarter. She would not wash, nor allow the rapists to clothe her the morning after. By disallowing her torture, rape and nakedness to intimidate her and instead by using these as weapons to insult and browbeat the enemy, Dopdi inverts the whole system of significations the epic is premised upon. The meanings that the Mahabharata episode assigns to sexual assault and nakedness, i.e., shame, loss, fear only serve to consolidate the operating relations of power. Mahasweta's Dopdi ironically reverses the semiotics of these signs to produce a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare among the male-violators.

Dopdi's defiance is absolute and is unaided by any divine male agency. The mythological Draupadi prays and asks for benign paternalism to come to her rescue. Draupadi of Mahabharata comes across as a hapless, helpless feminine figure, desperately seeking help from paternal powers in her predicament. Mahasweta's Dopdi is a strong female, full of life and self-respect who seeks help from none. She is too self-respecting to let the patriarchal norms of morality subjugate her into submission, and thus redefines the patriarchal nationalist construct of sexual 'honour' of a woman. She defies the authority of the nation-state that perpetuates violence and terror through its functionaries. Gangraped by police, Dopdi refuses to be clothed by men in uniform.

In her re-figuration of Draupadi, Mahasweta not only localizes her name ("Draupadi" is de-sanskritised and vernacularized to "Dopdi") but indigenizes her habitat also. Her Dopdi is a woman of forests, an offspring of nature and so love for freedom and disregard and detestation of the attempts to control and curtail is apart of her basic instincts. Senanayak, a representative of modern patriarchal world-order in the story, while supporting Dopdi and her cause in theory, attempts a total decimation of the resisting "object" in practice. After capturing Dopdi with his strategies maneuvering, Senanayak orders her "making". Dopdi's abuse doesn't stop short at the dignified, refined limits of an attempted "vastraharan" (an act of forced disrobing) of the epic variety, it entails an absolute "making" of her exercised over 'a billion moon', 'a million light years' (Draupadi 34).

### **Resistance through female body**

The tale of Draupadi out performs that of the epic in terms of the ravages are used as well as the reaction displayed by the victim. Unlike her mythological namesake, Dopdi doesn't seek any

divine intervention. The place of Dopdi's defiance is not the court of a 'Maharaja'; it is the wild space of a forest. Dopdi gets no divine male rescuer. The custodians of law offer a piece of cloth to hide her shame after subjecting her to multiple-rape throughout the night. Dopdi pours down the water, tears the cloth to pieces and refuses to cover herself up with the male-defined notions of 'shame' and 'female modesty'. Covering herself up would have been a reaffirming and a fortification of the man made morality preserved and sanctified by the patriarchal ideologies constructs of 'female honor' and 'breach of woman's modesty and her subject hood'. According to Spivak, Dopdi "acts in 'not acting'". (*In Other Worlds*95). However, the effectiveness of Dopdi's resistance is not the refusal to act, but the refusal to act predictably. She redefines the construct of "sexual honour" of a woman when she comes out naked and confronts Senanayak. Unlike the mythological Draupadi, she resists guilt, fear, shame or servility that are typically associated with the discourse of her "making"(in shame and servility), Dopdi challenges the brutalizer to "kounter" her and instead of lamenting at the loss of the supposed "respectability", she goes forward to question the masculinity of her "maker":

"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? She looks around and chooses the front to spit a bloody gab at and 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". (Draupadi 36-37

Dopdi's action totally dislocates and belittles the disciplined 'resistance' displayed by Draupadi's lamentations as she attempts to awaken the masculine powers of the great patriarchs in the grand epical narrative. In a stunning transformation the powerless tribal woman challenges the entire power of a ruthless postcolonial state embodied in figure of Senanayak. Draupadi confronts Senanayak, denigrates his false masculinist pride and challenges him to 'Kounter' her.

Draupadi looks like a victim but acts like an agent. Indeed, the binary of victim and agent falls apart as Draupadi effectively separates violation from victimhood. As she stands insistently naked before her violators, Dopdi manages to wield her wounded body as a weapon to terrify them. By refusing the disciplining power of shame scripted into the act of rape, Draupadi becomes, in the words of Mahasweta Devi's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a "terrifying super object".(Spivak 1988,184).

### **Conclusion**

The re-presentation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts: the subaltern woman can be represented in imaginative writing and she can be represented as an "agent". In this sense Mahasweta Devi's short story effectively dismantles Spivak's contention in her essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" that "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (1994:104). In Dopdi we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks loudly- literally and metaphorically, for, her 'voice...is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation'- makes herself heard.

**References:**

1. Chakravorti, Radha. "Reading Mahasweta: Shifting Frames," Ed. *Mahasweta Devi Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2011. Print.
2. Devi, Mahasweta. "Draupadi" *Breast Stories*. Trans. by Spivak, Gayatri, Kolkata: Seagull Press, 1997. Print.
3. Devi, Mahasweta, "Untrapped Resources", Seminar 359 (July 1989). Print.
4. Ghatak, Maitreya. Introduction *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta*. Ed. Maitreya Ghatak. Colcutta: Seagull Press, 2000. Print.
5. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can Subaltern speak?" *Norton Anthology of Criticism*. 2011. Print.