

Draupadi: A Metaphorical Resistance through an Elegy of the

Subaltern

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Abstract: Indian Literature is abundant in the projection of consignment of women's servitude and inhuman treatment of men. It raises the voice of resistance against patriarchal oppression in society in order to emancipate women with dignity and identity. It also focuses on the reconstruction of womanhood which emphasizes on the reordering of social and familial relationship with financial undependability of women. The woman who is considered 'subaltern' can as well 'resist and 'speak' when pushed to the ultimate margin. A particular concern for women and their issues make Mahasweta Devi's texts great areas of feminist research. Two forms of resistance are displayed by Mahasweta Devi in her story *Draupadi* – first is in the form of tribal insurgencies and the second is acted out by Dopdi Mejhan who is an active worker of the Naxalbari movement and is haunted down and raped in an attempt to conquer revolutionary groups. This paper ventures to highlight the strength of Dopdi Mejhan who walked shoulder to shoulder in these insurgencies.

Key words: Subaltern, Victimization, Resistance, Identity, Tribal.

Women are natural story tellers. Indian women writing novels in English came to their own after World War II and Mahasweta Devi is one of the greatest of these Bengali women novelists. Recipient of Magsayay and Gyanpeeth awards, Mahasweta Devi is a well known human right activist and writer who took up the cause of the oppressed and the downtrodden of society by writing for the liberation of bonded and unpaid labour. She also formed a platform known as Bonded Labour Liberation Organization. Whenever she saw violation of human rights, like that of an unpaid and bonded labourer or atrocities against women, she wrote fearlessly raising protest. Her writings have brought a new hope to the battered humanity. A woman of untiring

energy, Mahasweta Devi's art is born out of impatience and rage. According to her, art is cut off from its roots i.e. life. Life, as Mahasweta Devi has come to know through her lifelong close contact with the poorest classes of village people, is hard, cruel and merciless. It is to the expression of this life, and to the exposure of a social system that makes this life a reality. A close study of her works reveals two important phases of her social criticism. On the one hand is her deep distrust for the privileged upper classes who are either directly taking part in the oppressive dynamics of Indian society, or living in ivory towers, preferring to ignore its ugly realities. On the other hand, she expresses her heartfelt respect for the uneducated poor villagers with their solid goodness, un-quivering fortitude and backs that refuse to be broken by centuries of oppression. Her creative world is structured throughout on distinctive binary oppositions: between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, simple innocence and cultured opportunism. Her works have been translated into as many as fourteen languages with English, Italian, Japanese being the transnational ones. She is considered as one of the boldest Bengali female writers. Mahasweta Devi's writings show the influence of Naxalite movement of 1960s. She takes up the case of women and the tribal community in India and tends to be the champion of the political, social and economic development. *Draupadi* is one of her famous stories which have been set among the tribal in Bengal. This clearly shows Marxist feminist stance of Mahasweta Devi. As it were, the discussion culminated in an elegy of the subaltern.

It is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the pioneer of postcolonial analysis, who has discovered and rehabilitated Mahasweta Devi as a story teller. She has translated her stories especially the *Breast Stories*. The *Breast Stories* has been translated by Gayatri Spivak in which she has presented herself as Devi. The book *Breast Stories* consists of three stories which have common motif i.e. breast. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, breast is not only a symbol in these stories but also becomes a means of harsh indictment of an exploitative system. There are three protagonists i.e. Dopdi (Draupadi), Jashoda (Breast Giver) and Gangor (Behind the Bodice). *Breast Giver* is a story which has been built upon ivory of the past, class and patriarchy. In *Breast Giver*, a woman who becomes a professional wet-nurse to support her family dies of painful breast-cancer, betrays alike by the breasts that for years become her chief identity, and dozens of 'sons' she suckles. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that *Breast Giver*

is a story that builds itself on the cruel irony of caste, class and patriarchy. Mahasweta Devi keeps the name of Jashoda verbatim from the Sanskrit scriptural form. The orthodox Hindu class removes the Brahmin, and the prerogative of the economic class, in fact, much more real for it. The under classed Hindu female in *Breast Giver* is unable to save herself. Even in her death, she remains Jashoda Devi known as Goddess Jashoda, so to speak an honorary goddess by her caste. In *Breast Giver*, this is a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple and between domination and exploitation. In *Draupadi*, the protagonist, Dopdi Mejhan, is a tribal revolutionary who was arrested and gang-raped in custody, turned the terrible wounds of her breasts into a counter-offensive. In other words, in *Draupadi*, what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between sexuality and gender violence begins to falter. In *Behind the Bodice*, she decries the supposed normalcy of sexuality as male violence. In *Behind the Bodice*, migrant labourer Gangor's statuesque breasts excite the attention of an ace photographer, Upin Puri, triggering off a train of violence that ends in tragedy. Of course, I have restricted myself to one title i.e. *Draupadi* to initiate and to document my argument.

According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "When the subaltern 'speaks' in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible ...resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual" (Devi 1993: xxvi). In the main chapter 'translator's foreword', the translator analytically assessed the writings of the writer. *Draupadi*, the Bengali short story, has been translated into English for the sake of its villain called 'Senanayak', as for its title character Draupadi or Dopdi. Draupadi Mejhan, the central character of the story, is a Santhal tribal young woman of twenty seven years of age. She is the domicile of Cherakhan of Bankarjah. She is married to Dulna Majhi. She is introduced to the readers between two uniforms and between two versions of her name Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that, as a tribal, she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi or the tribalized form Dopdi is the proper name of ancient Draupadi. This pious and domesticated Hindu name was given to Dopdi at her birth by her mistress: "For this pious, domesticated Hindu name was given Dopdi at birth by her mistress, in the usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor's

wife toward the tribal bond servant” (Devi 1997: 9). Dopdi and Dulna are charged of murdering of Surja Sahu and his son. Dopdi is wanted by the local administration as she is considered the most notorious female in the area. She is long wanted, either dead or alive, in many cases. A reward of hundred rupees is declared to whom who will assist the administration in her arrest: “ Name Dopdi Mejhen, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrajharh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...”(Devi 1997: 19). In the official dossiers, it is recorded that Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhanu and Burdwan; Mursidabad and Bankura. Both the husband and wife are the main culprits for murdering Surja Sahu and his son occupying upper class wells and tube-wells during the draught and not surrendering those three young men to the police. It was said that, in all happenings, they both were the chief investigators. Dulna and Dopdi went underground for a long-time in the darkness. The armed forces tried their best to search out them in various districts of West Bengal. The reasons of the failure of armed forces were the underground couple’s skill in concealment and the same appearance of all tribal of the area.. They are suspected of attacking police station stealing guns, killing grains brokers, landlords, money lenders, law officers and bureaucrats. A black skinned couple, to keep the attention of their comrades, use to howl as a dog or wolf and like any police siren. The action of searching the couple Dulna and Dopdi was named as operation forest and Arjan Singh was the chief of this operation forest: “ Learning from Intelligence that the above-mentioned ululating and dancing couple was the escaped corpses, Arjan Singh fell for a bit into a zombielike state and finally acquired so irrational a dread of black-skinned people that whenever he saw a black person in a ball bag, he swooned, saying “they’re killing me, "and drank and passed a lot of water” (Devi 1997:21). They are the cause of Arjan Singh’s diabetic condition. He got depressed because of this operation. Dulna and Dopdi belong to the category of tribal fighters for they too kill by the means of shorthanded light axe and the instrument with a curved blade for moving and reaping the harvest; bow and arrow etc. In fact, their fighting power is greater than that of a gentleman. Even then Senanayak is not to be drifted with. The information is received that many young men and women have attacked police station, terrified and stimulated the region and disappeared into the forest of Jharkani. It is described in the story:

“Since after escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner; they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers, *rank and file*” (Devi 1997:23). Finally the impenetrable forest of Jharkani is surrounded by real soldiers. Army informant Dukhiram Gharani 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. It was later recognized that he was Dulna Majhi: “As they threw him off spread-eagled and brought bloody foam to his mouth, he roared "Ma-ho" and then went limp. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Majhi...” (Devi1997: 24). No one came to claim Dulna Majhi’s corpse. When Senanayak hears that no one has come to take the corpse, he became annoyed: “What?” Immediately one of the tribal specialists runs in with a joy as naked and transparent as Archimedes' and says, "Get up, sir! I have discovered the meaning of that 'hende rambra' stuff. It's Mundari language...” (Devi1997: 25). But the search for Dopdi still continues. It was just like a malignant tumour on the government’s back side. The fugitives do not allow themselves to be captured in open combat. Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood. No doubt, it is she who is saving the fugitives. It is considered by the forces that Dopdi Mejhan must have connection with fugitives. They keep company with the poor harvest workers and the tribes and therefore the operation Jharkani forest should not be stopped: “Therefore Operation Jharkhani Forest cannot stop. Reason: the words of warning in the Army Handbook.” (Devi1997:27). After some days, when Dopdi was on her march with some rice knotted in her belt, she picked the lice in her hair coming back to her. Mushai Tuda’s wife called her out, but she did not respond by her own name. These days her name is Upi Mejhan. Here, no one but Mushai and his wife know her real name. She thought it was Surja Sahu who arranged with Biddibahu to dig two tube-wells and three wells within the compound of his two houses. No water anywhere, draught in Bhirbhum and there was unlimited water at Surja’s house. He was not ready to give water without canal tax. He did not accept the Panchayat orders. He said that the untouchables didn’t get the water and the quarrel began. Surja Sahu’s house was surrounded at night. Surja had brought out his gun but, in a counter attack, was tied up with cow rope. When his eyes were turned, Dulna and Dopdi had crawled on their stomach to safety. And she came out of her thoughts, who called her train, back today. She thinks of nothing but entering

the forest. The police have set up notices for her. The bastard Sahib had appeared again .She must change the place of her hidings. Dopdi turned left, the way to the camp; but not the way to the forest. Dopdi has already seen the new camp. She has sat in the bus station , passed the time by smoking bidi and found out how many police conveys had arrived. Dopdi turns again. Suddenly Dopdi's ears were struck by a voice calling behind her "halt" (Devi 1997: 33). He was Surja Sahu's brother, Rtoni Sahu. Dopdi 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 toward 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...." (Devi1997: 34). Senanayak's hunt this time is Dopdi on whom he can apply the tactic of rape for elimination. He disappeared after ordering that "Make her. Do the needful..." (Devi1997: 34). 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 will force. Although scarred for life, she still possesses an indomitable spirit and thus refuses to ask for water when her throat is chocked. When after a long period of British Savagery; she came into sense to some extent, she found herself tied to four posts by her arms and legs spreaded to each other. She felt something like viscid and viscous under her waist; buttocks and rectum. It was her own blood. The cloth which was thrust into her mouth to prevent her scream had been removed. She felt that her vagina was bleeding. She thought that many British came to pillage and mangle her. Tears rolled out from her eyes. She saw that her breasts were cut into with teeth; the nipple torn. She again imagines how many they were. She was lying totally undressed. Her white cloth (sari without blouse) was laying at a long distance to her. She heard a sound of moving feet. It was the guard who came to her and gave an evil glance to her. Now again the process of violent attacking to sexual intercourse with her begins and goes on unlimitedly: "Again the process of making her begins. 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..." (Devi1997: 35). In the next morning, she is brought to the tent and thrown on the straw. She was ordered to move to Burra Sahib and she was ready to Burra Sahib herself done. Her behaviour was

strange. It seemed that she is mentally disordered. Senanayak was surprised to see her totally naked and she was walking towards him. Naked Draupadi stands before him. He saw that her thigh and the hair below the lower part of abdomen tangled with dry blood. The breasts were having two wounds. She laughed before Senanayak and said: “The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up; don't you want to see how they made me?” (Devi1997: 36). Draupadi's black body comes closer to him. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Wiping the blood, she asked: “What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?”(Devi1997: 36). She spitted the bloody spittle on the white bush shirt of Senanayak and said that why she should be ashamed because there was not even a single man there: “What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me-?”(Devi1997:37). Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mutilated disfigured and crushed breasts and for the first time Senanayak was afraid of his ‘unnamed target’ –the Senanayak. In essence, she is telling Senanayak that his methods of torture will not work. His attempts to victimize her will not destroy her emotionally, mentally and physically.

To sum up, we can say that being a product of the third world, Mahasweta Devi is aware of the different forms of victimization that the women face in the society one way or the other. In *Draupadi*, she has taken the case of Dopdi with a mythical parallel from the epic. She does not romanticize Dopdi but presents her case, her subjection to male tyranny as she becomes the victim of the lust in male dominant world. Draupadi is unlike any other female characters in the stories of Mahasweta Devi. She is the representation of a female figure ready to stand up for her rights and her beliefs, and is the only female to maintain power over her torturer. She can make Senanayak feel the fear. In short, she asserts herself as the male figure and Senanayak becomes the female figure. He is terrified by Draupadi and is unable to anticipate her next move. So, Draupadi 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. This clearly shows that Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a metaphorical resistance through an elegy of the subaltern.

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