

MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*: A STUDY OF CONFLICT BETWEEN LIMINALITY AND MARGINALITY

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Abstract

The present paper is intended to examine Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Draupadi* in the light of liminality and marginality. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was born and grown up in a period when cultural hybridization was already institutionalized in the Indian Sub-Continent. Like other Indian writers she is seen to scrutinize the Indian society continually under change due to the colonial rule and its casual consequence—the issues of liminals and marginals. She extended her study of tribal communities in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh where she narrated the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising land lords, money lenders and government. That's why, her attitude towards liminality and marginality, the outcome of cultural colonization, appears to have resulted from and shaped by the tribal reality prevailing in the post-colonial setting.

Keywords: Cultural hybridization, Liminality, Marginality, Post-colonial, Mahasweta Devi.

Introduction

The study on Marginality and Liminality is one of the most rapidly expanding areas of scholarly study. These two words emerged, roughly in the middle of the last century, as two innovating or even revolutionary shorthand techniques disseminated by leading anthropologists. They barely suspected that these terms were destined to make possible a sort of avant-garde change in our traditional ways of thinking. These two metaphors of space, marginality and liminality, evoking borders and edges, the white empty portion of a page surrounding the body of writing, a limit or "condition beyond which something ceases to exist or be possible" (definition given in the Webster dictionary) may be bent to re-interpret the inner dynamics of Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Draupadi*.

'Marginality' is often used as a term to describe the situation of black South Africans who, although apparently part of the majority group, found themselves systematically excluded from or denied full participation in South African society. The term is, of course, metaphorical and interpersonal - it contrasts the periphery with the centre, and

the situation of those who are excluded or disempowered with the situation of those who have access to the rights and privileges which citizenship normally confers. For the sake of clarity let us go over the specific meanings of the terms ‘liminality’ and ‘marginality’.

Van Gennep identified “margin” with “limen” (threshold), and the two terms designate in his framework the space of transition or rite –de- passage in initiation ceremonies, whereby the ‘initiant’, who is at first provisionally separated from the community, passes through a “liminal” stage before being incorporated into the social order (Van Gennep, 1960). Victor Turner, by contrast, keeps “liminality” distinct from “marginality”. At any rate, for him in social ceremonies of initiation, “liminality, the area “between and betwixt”, marks the movement from a rigid social or economical structure to an anti-structure where the values of the social structure are parodied or questioned. In this sense, “liminality” gives itself as a middle ground or metaphoric space where disjunctive experiences unite. Liminality is, thus, a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point, and as such it is a temporary state that ends when the initiate is reincorporated into the social structure, maintains Turner (Turner, 1974).

On the other hand, Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity. Thus, Marginality can be viewed as the flip side of liminality: it challenges the optimism inherent in the assumption of a shift of status and it describes experiences to the margin that remind a centre.

Discussion of the Problem

Let us briefly illustrate this point by looking at the narrative structure of a text, which is exemplary in its presentation of the mode of cultural discourses, Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was born and grown up in a period when cultural hybridization was already institutionalized in the Indian Sub-Continent. She extended her study of tribal communities in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh where she narrated the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising land lords, money lenders and government. Like other Indian writers she is seen to scrutinize the Indian society, especially Indian tribal society, continually under change due to the colonial rule and its casual consequence—the issues of liminals and marginals.

In a good number of post-independence Indian writing the dynamics of subaltern issues can be easily seen. Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* follows such a trend in depicting the experiences of a tribal woman who is the by-product of class struggle in postcolonial tribal India. With a gentle, unpretentious style and straightforward plotting, Devi portrays in this story an ordinary wife struggling to make sense of her life as Indian tribal tradition clashed with modernity and a nascent nationalism eroded a [colonial mentality](#). This story testifies to Devi’s complex use of the text which projects to some extent, a dialectical structure of values

related to marginality and liminality in a postcolonial setting on the light of class struggle. Here Devi tries to unfold how an ordinary tribal folk's naive concept of truth matures from a level of skin-deep perception to a veritable height of realisation. The present paper attempts to present how a rebellious Santhal wife, victimized by marginality and liminality, conducts her search for her true identity in a society of prevailing class system and in this process, reaches her goal through self-discovery.

In this short story both temporal and spatial relationships are relevant. Turner mentions. Marginality is to be on the margins of something. Someone who has been marginalized has been pushed to the edges of society and out of position of power or influence. If we consider Draupadi's life we see that Santhal tribe girl, is vulnerable to injustice but resist the force of social oppression and violence with unconquerable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age old structures of racial and gender discrimination. The most interesting part of the story is that she is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Obviously, Dopdi lives in a space where her insight of cultural values undergoes a forced amalgamation which exhibits an inclination to traditional tribal values as well as a zest for a postcolonial repositioning of the cultural identity. She is, thus, 'betwixt and between', after Turner's phrase.

At the very outset of the narrative Draupadi is seen belonging to a double space of a syncretized culture along with what appears to be an ironic counterpointing of different modes of official discourse through which the central character is named, constructed, displaced and silenced. She and her husband Dulna are on the 'most wanted' list in West Bengal. They murder wealthy landlords to claim wells and tube-wells which are their main sources of water in the village. They fight for their right to basic means of sustenance. Dulna is eventually gunned down by policemen; however Draupadi manages to escape and begins to operate the movement. She tactfully misleads the cops who are on her trail, so that the fugitives' campsite remains a secret. However, she is finally caught and kept in police custody. This is where the story actually begins.

Over the course of a few days, Draupadi is repeatedly raped and tortured by multiple police officers who state that their orders to "make her" have come from their Bade Sahib, officer Senanayak, in charge of her case. The next day, the policemen take her back to the tent and tell her to clothe herself, because it is time for her to meet Senanayak. But she proceeds to walk out of her tent, towards Senanayak, naked and with her head held high. When Senanayak asks where her clothes are, she replies, that clothes were useless because once she was stripped, she could not be clothed again. She spits on Senanayak with disgust and says "How can you clothe me? Are you a man? There isn't a man here, that I should be ashamed.' She pushes Senanayak with her exposed breasts and for the first time, he is afraid to counter an unarmed woman. In that moment, though Draupadi has no weapons, she uses her body as her greatest weapon. The body which was abused, tortured, marginalised and

seen as the cause of her downfall, becomes the very weapon with which she stands up for herself. Mahasweta Devi presents Draupadi, a marginal figure, as a strong female character, disobeying sexual orientation and social standards.

Mahasweta's *Draupadi* is an inimitable response of the Draupadi of the epic *Mahabharata*. It is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. Here through Dopdi Mahasweta Devi has tried to raise certain question of responsibility, as she herself demands certain political responses from us. She expects us to know something about the Naxalbari movement and she also wants us to understand something about the revolution that Dopdi is fighting for us. Being a tribal means that she is not considered as a part of mainstream Indian society, she is marginal. She thus occupies lowest rung in a class based society. But in the story we find that the status and respect women are accorded in tribal society is far superior to that of women in mainstream Hindu society. They are treated as equals and protected. Dopdi is seen fighting shoulder to shoulder with her husband. It is in the third part of the story that she is provoked to fight male oppression singly, and in the conclusion the use of the white cloth which is associated with purity and innocence, visually contrasted with Dopdi's black body, and is very powerful. So, here Mahasweta Devi represents Dopdi not as victim but she is equal to men who fight for her rights.

There is another important point to be made about liminality in Devi's *Draupadi*, and that is the mobility, or freedom of movement, that comes with liminality. By freedom of movement it is to be meant the freedom of the characters to move back and forth between states and areas, either physically or mentally. Going back to Van Gennep's original formulation, liminality is the ambiguous phase where the initiate is outside of society but preparing to re-enter society. There is very little freedom of movement due to the strict nature of the ritual process. When we apply this idea of liminality to this story, it is found that liminal characters like Dopdi and Dulna possess a freedom of movement that non-liminal characters like Senanayak do not.

Conclusion

Thus, viewed in a positive light, liminality provides freedom of movement, but the flip side of that coin is a lack of stability. Being 'betwixt and between' means that one does not belong to anywhere. As social animals, few humans can survive for long without belonging somewhere, at least to some extent. But in the case of Dopdi it is impossible to retain there, although keeping in mind Bill Ashcroft's observation that "...within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is impossible to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition" (Ashcroft 109-10). In defence of Mahasweta Devi it can be affirmed that Dopdi's refusal to wear cloth, i.e, the symbol of civilization is no schizophrenic withdrawal and instead, with her own armour of ideology (here Naxalite Revolution), Dopdi plumbs the depth of her own experiences and in the process re-discovers her native tribal cultural roots in a society of Post-Independence socio-cultural confusions. She comes to a realisation of truth only after a heroic negotiation of cultural confusions and changes of her

time and space. The more dynamic she becomes, though, the more she is saturated from the social structure formulated by upper class society, and the more she becomes a liminal. But, ultimately, liminality (like liminal figures) is hard to pin down. It is transitory, like a wisp of smoke in the wind. Dopdi's heroic negation is technically nothing but a strategy of postcolonial resistance against marginality. Here Devi celebrates the female body as her greatest asset to overcome oppression and objectification faced by the marginal. In fact, Mahasweta Devi's position in this regard is deemed quite complex—she is aware that revolution is the ultimate reality of the post-colonial scenario (here, twentieth century Bengal), yet she is found to have accepted the traditional Indian culture (here, tribal culture) as the real asset for the people living in culturally hybridized society. So, there is the eternal conflict between liminality and marginality, the outcome of cultural colonization, and that will help to re-interpret the texts written in Post-colonial perspectives.

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