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POWER AND RESISTANCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "THE HUNT" AND "DRAUPADI"

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's stories provide a convoluted and piquant site of contestation in the literary feminist discourse. The study analyses the 'objectification' and 'marginalization' of women through the reading of "The Hunt" and "Draupadi". Many a time, a woman's body is turned into a 'territory' to be 'conquered and controlled' by the repressive mechanisms of state and society. However, to reclaim their denied space, women often traverse onto the path of confrontation and resistance. In the story, "The Hunt", Mary Oraon refuses to be cowed down by the lustful advances of a logging contractor named Tehsildar. In Bakhtin's 'carnivalesque' mode, the story unfolds a temporary subversion of hierarchies. It is during this time that Mary Oraon kills Tehsildar by throwing him into a ravine. In "Draupadi", Dopdi is a Naxalite rebel hunted down by the state. The very act of ripping Dopdi off her honour at the command of Senanayak backlashes and threatens the patriarchal authority when she refuses to be clothed again, thereby deconstructing the hegemonic control. I argue that Mahasweta Devi's women characters wield power and assertion through resilience and resistance.

Key Words: objectification, marginalization, repressive mechanisms of state and society, resistance, carnivalesque, hegemonic deconstruction

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is a socio-political commentator whose formidable spirit has led her to write hauntingly powerful tales of oppression, dislocation, exploitation, and struggle. Her activism effectively gets translated into her writings as she unearths the nexus between the local bureaucrats and international capitalism, sexism and caste politicsand social conduits of control and state-controlled repression. Her art is palpably political and hasa self-professed agenda ofcarrying forward her activist crusade. In Devi's words: "I think a creative writer

should have a social conscience" (*Imaginary Maps* x). Though her mode of expression is Bengali and her writings have been translated into English,they transcend the particularities of her linguistic medium and geographical space, and emerge as a voice of heightened conscience.In Devi's own words, "I consider myself an Indian writer, not a Bengali writer. I am proud of this" (*Imaginary Maps* xix).Her writings link the specific fate of the tribals in India to that of the dispossessed and marginalized people across the globe.

Devi's work hovers across several disciplineslike literature, journalism, sociology, politics, history and mythology.Shefuses history, myth, legend and socio-political realities into her narratives to map the troubling and distressing lives of the indigenous tribes of India. However, it is not the conventionally disseminated history that peeps through her stories. It is rather a revised version of history – a subversive interpretation of past facts that has been hitherto conveniently kept under the wraps. Her writings open up floodgates to the stark realities of exploitation whereby readers immerse themselves into her explosive narratives and traverse along the trail of politics of representation, identity, oppression and struggle. Women, in particular, are subjected to the interlocking oppressions of gender, class and patriarchy. They are denied any autonomous space, be it physical or metaphorical. Her stories provide a convoluted and piquant site of contestation in the literary feminist discourse. The present paper exploresthe 'objectification' and 'marginalization' of women and their subaltern status through the reading of Mahasweta Devi's selected short stories – "The Hunt" and "Draupadi". Devi's poignant narration unmasks the politics of treating a woman's body as a 'territory' to be 'conquered and controlled' by the repressive mechanisms of state or society. However, to carve their identity and reclaim their denied space, women often traverse onto the path of confrontation and resistance. Many of Mahasweta Devi's women characters wield power and assertion through resilience, resistance, and strong will. Both the stories of Devi – "The Hunt" and "Draupadi" have points of convergence in the form of the shared indomitable spirit of the protagonists and their refusal to accept subjugation at the hands of male-dominated power structures.Woodrow T. Wilson has rightly said, "The history of liberty is a history of resistance."

Devi has always brandished oppression in its various manifestations as part of her journalistic exposure. She has relentlessly fought for the cause of the tribals in the states of West Bengal and Bihar. Devi believes that "[t]he tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point" (*Imaginary Maps* x). Devi displays her vociferous remonstrance against the colonial and patriarchal discourses that are largely premised upon a chain of binary oppositions, such as colonizer/colonized, man/woman, white/black, public/private, and centre/periphery. These binaries perpetuate a violent hierarchy where the colonized, the marginalized peoples especially the indigenous tribes, and the women are labeled as deviant/disruptive groupsin social, political and cultural contexts.

Dopdi and her 'oppositional gaze'

It is against the background of pauperization of the tribals and their armed Naxaliterevolt in response to feudalism, bonded slavery, and state repressionthat the story "Draupadi" has been set.The first such political uprising took place in the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal in the late 1960s, hence the term 'Naxalism'. The story appears in Devi's collection of stories entitled *Breast Stories*and has been translated by GayatriChakrovortySpivak.In "Draupadi", Devi contextualizes the mythical 'Draupadi' of Mahabharata within the contemporary space and time by naming a tribal woman 'Dopdi'('Draupadi' is de-sanskritizedin vernacular to 'Dopdi') and symbolically interweaves, compares and contrasts their fate. As in the case of Draupadi, DopdiMejhen is also victimized by the the male-dominated state authorities.

Dopdi, a twenty-seven year old tribal woman, is a Santhalrevolutionary insurgent who along with her husband, Dulna and other revolutionaries revolts against the moneylenders, landlords, and grain brokers through guerrilla warfare using hatchet, scythe, bow and arrow. The state government uses all coercive apparatuses including kidnapping, murder and rape to curb the progression of rebels and any tribal deaths in custody are deemed as 'accidents' which go unaccounted for. Dopdi is described as the most notorious female who has been long wanted in many cases. She is named by her mistress and is in the list of wanted persons who has killed the mistress's husband, SurjaSahu(a land-owning money lender). SurjaSahu, the feudal landlord of the area backed by the state gets two tube-wells and three wells dug within the compound of his two houses.When the whole Birbhum is struck with famine, he, with his swollen feudal arrogance, refuses to share water with the untouchables. This instigates the revolutionaries (including Dopdi and Dulna), who resort to killing him. Dopdi and Dulna manage to escape the Operation Bakuli where many revolutionaries are killed but they fake dead, run away from the scene, and go underground. It is Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics, who gets Dulna killed and later Dopdi is captured too. When she realizes that she has been caught by the authorities, she does not succumb to the pressure of the police, rather she warns her fellow workers against the impending doom in her loud tribal enunciation. Devi writes, "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" (*Breast Stories* 34).

Dopdi is taken to the camp where after a questioning of two hours, Senanayak orders the police to "[m]ake her. Do the needful" (*Breast Stories* 34). As she is physically violated, it seems that "[t]hen a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years" (*Breast Stories* 34). The lunar imagery corresponds with the darkness of sexual violence as Devi writes, "In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye . . ." (*Breast Stories* 34-35). After repeated mutilation of her body, Dopdi hopes against hope that the ordeal might be over but the process of "making her begins" again and the murky moon now "vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep" (*Breast Stories* 35). The custodians of law offer her a piece of cloth to hide her

shame after subjecting her to repeated rape throughout the night. Dopdi pours down water, tears the cloth to pieces and refuses to cover herself up with the male-defined notions of 'shame' and 'decorum'. Her 'objectified body' eventually transmutes into a convoluted socio-political site of resistance from where Dopdi strives to deconstruct and de-normalize the repressive disciplinary apparatuses. The violators might think that they had been able to crush her spirit, but in the morning, Dopdi is still resolute as she confronts Senanayak in "the bright sunlight with her head high" (*Breast Stories* 36). The bright sunlight is symbolic of her inexorable 'chutzpah' through which she has been able to drive away the darkness. Devi writes:

> 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 of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob 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–? (*Breast Stories* 36)

Dopdi defies all the male-established notions of shame and addresses herself as "[t]he object of your search" (*Breast Stories*36) in front of Senanayak. Draupadi's insolent and rebellious looks can be likened to the "looks that were seen as oppositional, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority"(hooks 115).bellhooks maintains: "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (hooks 116). Devi writes that for the first time, Senanayak fears standing before "an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (*Breast Stories* 37).

Carnivalization in "The Hunt" as a mode of subversion

Like "Draupadi", "The Hunt" also deals with a tribal girl Mary Oraonand herrefusal to be reduced to a 'commodified self'. "The Hunt" is a part of her story collection *Imaginary Maps* (translated by GayatriChakrovortySpivak) and can be read as a carnivalized literary text that de-privileges the authoritative voice of the hegemony by toppling the hierarchies upside down. Mary is a half-tribal woman (the result of an illegitimate relationship between her tribal mother, Bhikni and a white imperialist man). Devi describes her in these words: "Eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured, light copper skin. Usually she wears a print sari. At a distance she looks most seductive, but close up you see a strong message of rejection in her glance" (*Imaginary Maps* 2). This description hints at her assertive and aggressive disposition with which she does not compromise in any given situation. Mary Oraon is an independent and strong-willed woman who assumes all 'masculine' traits by doing all odd jobs for the

Prasad household in return for boarding, lodging, clothing and sundries. She is the most efficient cowherd, sells fruits from Prasads' orchards, strikes hard business bargains, and takes the train to Tohri with vegetables from the field. Devi writes, "She gets smokes from the other marketeers, drinks tea, and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one" (*Imaginary Maps* 3). Devi writes about "her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor-sharp mind" (*Imaginary Maps* 5). She is betrothed to a Muslim Jalim which again reinforces her refusal to conform to societal norms. The trouble begins when a logging contractor named Tehsildar is bewitched by her raw beauty and wants to possess her body. He starts stalking Mary constantly and is not discouraged even when she repudiates and humiliates him privately as well as publicly. She squelches his advances with stern retaliatory remarks and threatens him to show her machete if he does not step back. She often wards off men by flashing her machete as a threat. The machete can be viewed as a symbol of women's equal rights and assertion of power. It shows that Mary has the capability of assuming 'masculine' role with ease and promptness. However, Tehsildar is thick-skinned and chases her with single-minded pursuit. Mary manages to dupe him by deferring her sexual encounter with him till the night of a tribal ritual of the hunt by the women of the tribe. For twelve years, men run the hunt. Then, it is JaniParab when women go out for the hunt with bows and arrows. The festival is exemplary of the toppling of the hierarchies (though temporarily only).

The festival of JaniParab can be likened to a Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival. Bakhtin defines carnival in these words: ". . . carnivalistic life is a life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent "life turned inside out," "the reverse side of the world" (Bakhtin122). In the Middle Ages, 'Carnival'was an arena where social decorum was rejected and violated, and sacrilegious events could occur with impunity. Therefore, carnival represents a topsy-turvy world where law and order do not exist and disorder is celebrated. All these aspects of carnival have greatly influenced literature. Though "The Hunt" does not embody the theory and spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin'snotion of carnivalesque in its entirety, yet some of its elements are present subtly as well as explicitly.The carnivalesque subtext of the story allows counter-hegemonic and subversive voices to run parallel to the official, serious, and authoritative voice of the ruling class. According to Bakhtin, during the time of carnival, excessive drinking and eating, together with dancing and games were indicative of the irrepressible life force, ever changing in its vitality.In the story, during JaniParab, the village of Kurudaalso soaks itself in boundless feasting, drunken revelry, singing, dancing, and clowning.Women take up the role of men (hunting), thereby inverting the patriarchal hegemony. Devi writes, "They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what men do. Once in twelve years" (*Imaginary Maps*12). Hence, Bakhtin's notion of the 'liberating' and 'pluralizing' force of the carnival becomes manifest in the story during the spring festival, though the inversion of the established order is suspended only till the time festival ends. Devi has drawn material and resources for writing

this story from the actual life-experiences, rituals and practices of the tribals in Bihar. She explains about the festival: "It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to justice. They would not go to the police. In Santali language it was the Law-bir. Law is the law, and *bir* is forest. And every twelfth year is JaniParab, the women's hunting festival in Bihar" (*Imaginary Maps* xviii).

Having killed the biggest beast, Tehsildar Singh during JaniParab,Mary takes away his money, throws his body in the ravine. Therefore, the festival lives up to its spirit of retributive justice. Mary anticipates the tainting of her honour and decides to kill her potential rapist. Once the 'justice' is meted out, Mary joins in the festivities with her people. She drinks heavily, sings, dances, eats meat and rice with the greatest relish. Though women mock her for not having hunted any animal, yet Budhni comments that she eats this way as if she had the "biggest kill" (*Imaginary Maps*17) and then, while dancing with others, she moves back. And the story ends thus:"Backing in the dark . . . Mary runs fast in the dark. She knows the way by heart.She will walk seven miles tonight by way of Kuruda hill and reach Tohri. She willawaken Jalim. From Tohri there are buses, trucks. They will go away somewhere. Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Gomo, Patna. Now, after the big kill, she wants Jalim" (*Imaginary Maps*17).

Dopdi and Mary's trespassing of the 'gender stereotypes' as a form of active resistance

The study attempts to expose the 'exclusivist' and 'exploitative' character of the male dominant paradigm and at the same time,by inserting alternative and resistive voices of women. Dopdi and Mary's trespassing of the defined and imposed 'gender constructs' threatens the ideological and cultural citadel of the whole patriarchal order.The intersecting motifs between the stories are quite noticeable, for instance, the use of weapons such as scythe and machete for self-defence by Dopdi and Mary, their unyielding courage, and defiance of social order.The story of Dopdi remains open-ended as she challenges the inflated male ego with her defiant act, yet the courage of a woman opens up possibilities of active resistance against the structures of oppression. Similarly, Mary Oraon's narrative is premised upon convoluted and contradictory possibilities. It is not narrated what happens to Mary after she flees the place. She may or may not be hunted down by the state authorities, may or may not be subject to harassment or brutality if she is caught. This web of complex probabilities has not been touched upon by Devi. She proposes no clear-cut endings or solutions, rather presents her stories as a matter-of-fact style. Nevertheless, she gives her characters some agency to transgress their present state of delirium so that they can retain their dignity and self-esteem. The study argues that these two stories by Devi are not a study in pessimism, rather initiate a revolutionary spark which challenges, questions, and have the potential to transgress the social and political discursive formations which legitimate the oppression of the subaltern women.

Conclusion

Lauren Oliver, the author of *Delirium* writes, "You can build walls all the way to the sky and I will find a way to fly above them. You can try to pin me down with a hundred thousand arms, but I will find a way to resist. And there are many of us out there, more than you think" (qtd. in Wolfelt 76). These powerful lines by Lauren Oliver sum up the raison d'être of Mahasweta Devi that where there is a strong foothold of power structures, resistance will also come knocking at the threshold. Devi's writings have the potential to shake the readers out of their slumberous complacency and urge them to raise their voice against injustice, without sentimentalizing her narratives.

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