

A Critical Assessment of the Gendered Subaltern Existence in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi was a renowned writer cum social activist who remained a champion of the rights of the suppressed and oppressed classes all through her long career. It is a well-recognized fact that her works primarily deal with the dejected livelihood of the tribal communities deep in the interiors of West Bengal and is a biting comment against the exploitative administrative system that crushes them iron-handedly and without discrimination. The eponymous "Draupadi", presents a protagonist who suffers dire brutality at the hands of a mutilating system, which not only ravages her mind, body and soul, but even viciously declares her as the culprit and an outlaw, thereby justifying her annihilation. The objective of the paper is to critically evaluate Mahasweta Devi's stance with respect to the subalterns and even in that, the female gender that continues to suffer double marginalization on account of sex. Using the views of renowned scholars of subaltern studies such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, the paper intends to explore if the narrative of "Draupadi" sticks to the portrayal of tribal resistance or moves a step further to offer a narrative of change.

Mahasweta Devi breathed her last almost a year ago but the concerns that her life as a writer and a champion social activist continually raised are still very relevant and will continue to do so in the coming decades. It is a well-recognized fact that her works primarily deal with the dejected livelihood of the tribal communities deep in the interiors of West

Bengal and is a biting comment against the exploitative administrative system that crushes them iron-handedly and without discrimination. Ordinary people and humble rustic life inspired her work and she herself stated the source of her inspiration to be the oppressed tribals and untouchables who have been devastated and taken full advantage of as a result of the nexus of class-conscious upper-caste landlords, cunning money-lenders and corrupt administrative officers:

The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing. (Bardhan, 24)

The titular story also presents a protagonist who suffers dire cruelty at the hands of a system, which not only ravages her mind, body and soul, but even viciously declares her as the culprit and an outlaw, thereby justifying her annihilation. The title of the story is an uncanny reference to the mythological figure of 'Draupadi' in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, who is a universal representative of humiliated, bartered and exploited womanhood. That the story goes much further in its crude and undiplomatic depiction of a tribal woman's plight is a different matter. The 'Draupadi' of the story is not just humiliated by an array of soldiers who take turns tearing apart the dignity of her body but is also branded as a villain who deserved to be 'made' in the brutish manner that she was.

The story reflects how the poor tribals have to pay a huge price of surrendering their liberty and freedom as a result of daring to rebel against the established system. They had no say and no voice of their own in the present state of things; they were discriminated on the basis of caste, creed, colour, and language. It is relevant to note Sanatan Bhowal's observation with regard to this parameter of the subalterns being able to voice their story or be heard. In his book, *The Subaltern Speaks*, Bhowal writes discusses at length about the concept of the subaltern:

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci has spoken of 'subaltern classes' to designate the politically 'uncoordinated popular MASS' (Brooker 2003: 239). For Guha, the word 'subaltern' means 'of inferior rank', as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Guha 1982: I). This word is used in studies of the adivasis – India's tribal population who comprise 'about one-sixth of the total population of the country' (Devi 1995/2001: i) and who find literary representation in Devi's fiction. (*The Subaltern Speaks*, 2)

Bhowal finds that representation of the subalterns in the entire discourse around subaltern studies has been problematic for researchers and scholars in the field. Even Guha's Subaltern Studies Collective suffered a lot of difficulties struggling to find a firm basis of a theory of subaltern studies and the representations of the subaltern. According to Spivak, the representation that the subalterns have received is of two types: literary and political. But, Bhowal concludes that it is the political representation that has disrupted the course of things and so far, aesthetic representation has remained subordinate to it. Even the focus of literary scholars and contributors has been to emphasize the themes of resistance and revolt among the subalterns, instead of pondering over the prospects of change. Bhowal writes:

Spivak in her 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1985a) argues that the contributors perceive their task as making a theory of consciousness or culture rather than a theory of change. As such they do not sympathetically emphasize 'the force of crisis' (Spivak 1985a: 331) and their sober tone does not allow them to bring the hegemonic historiography to a crisis. (*The Subaltern Speaks*, 6)

However if the tribals ever try to upset the state of things in society, they were labeled as unruly outlaws who must be captured and wiped out before they affect others with their mentality. In order to catch the couple, the armed forces kill several other completely innocent tribals, just because they mistake them on account of their physical appearance. To them all the santhals and the Munda tribals appeared more or less the same and so, when doubts arose that among them may be the wanted couple, they were indiscriminately shot dead. Even then, Devi's "Draupadi" is a promising narrative of change as Draupadi, even after being sexually ravaged and mutilated, remains unbeaten and dauntless. She may be forceless today but her bold confrontation and her fearless spirit hints at a better future in which the subaltern would not just speak on equal terms but be heard as well. Bhowal notes Mahasweta Devi's own comment in this regard: "Bashai Tudu and Draupadi and their peers are the products of these events, and their makers as well; for it is they who change society and come to symbolize the time and the place, transcending their names and the local situations." (Devi 2002a: xvii).

The story takes on real depth with the introduction of the character of its chief villain, Senanayak. He is shown to be as shrewd a strategist as the absconding tribal couple. He is also a staunch believer in the Army Handbook that has stringent rules for containing and suppressing acts of rebellion:

It is not a book for everyone. It says that the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every

soldier. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the *category* of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow, etc. in fact, their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. (393-394)

Senanayak is aware that the soldiers are misguided in believing that wielding powerful guns makes it a trifling game to combat with the tribals who have nothing but outdated weapons. He believes that the sheer overconfidence of those who hold the guns sometimes leads them to underestimate the genius of people such as Dopdi and Dulna Majhi and becomes the reason of their continual failure to arrest them. Senanayak comes across as a judicious and quite experienced planner who does not make the foolish mistake of belittling his enemy just because he wields the power of the gun. He is aware that some battles are of the mind and the clever fight not just on the basis of weapons but of wisdom too.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses his character to compare him to the First World scholar looking out for the Third World. Senanayak may respect his opposition in theoretical terms but practically, he has no choice but to annihilate them. Spivak observes:

The approximation I notice relates to the author's careful presentation of Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete. In theory, Senanayak can identify with the enemy. But pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society. Hence in practice, Senanayak must destroy the enemy, the menacing other. (381)

His declared stance of combating the tribal enemies is: "In order to destroy the enemy, become one." This he does, by at least, theoretically, becoming one with the enemy. When the several groups of tribals attack the police stations and disappear into the unnavigable, dense forest of Jharkhani, the soldiers in large numbers surround the forest and lay in hiding, guarding the only source of water for the people of the region, the falls and springs. This is how they are able to trap Dulna Majhi and shoot him dead:⁵

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 Majhi. (394-395)

The loud call of 'Ma-Ho' perplexes Senanayak deeply. The army summons experts on tribal life to decipher its meaning but they are unable to do so after much brainstorming. It is Senanayak, who then calls Chamru, a local water carrier of the camp and asks him the meaning of Majhi's slogan. He reveals that 'Ma-ho' is a battle cry that the santhals of Maldah started using during the colonial times in opposition of the British forces.

The army tries its best to use the dead body of Dulna Majhi as bait for Dopdi but, she proves a match for Senanayak's cunning schemes and does not fall under his set trap. She is well-aware of the nooks and corners of the forest and she becomes an indispensable aid in the tribals' combat with the soldiers. Through her directions, the villagers are able to save themselves in the next phase of fighting. Sanatan Bhowal remarks in his analysis of the story in this regard:

By deploying a Special Force to cover the entire Jharkhani forest area and enlisting local people as informers, Senanayak succeeds in getting Dulna shot down. But his failure to bait Draupadi with her husband's corpse remains a thorn in his flesh. And yet, there is no challenge to the dominant discourse of state power; there is no change in the policy of 'apprehension and elimination'. Dukhiram who works as an informer for the Special Force is killed in retaliation for Dulna's death, but this does not affect the larger scheme of things. The power of the state is all the more ascendant. (*The Subaltern Speaks*, 119)

This confrontation has gone on for six years with no resolution being possible and it is equally uncertain that how many tribals have been killed in such combats from time to time. Mahasweta raises some poignant questions the answer to which is always a deafening silence on the part of the authorities: "Why after confrontations are the skeletons discovered with arms broken or severed? Could armless men have fought? Why do the collarbones shake, why are legs and ribs crushed?" (396) There is hardly any remorse or pain which should have been the ideal response of concerned administrative and governmental machinery.

Dopdi displays her wisdom till the last moments of her capture. She is tactful enough not to respond or turn around on hearing her name being called. Even so, she remains prepared for the time of her capture and is determined not to betray her other comrades even if she is caught. She prepares her mind to be able to bear the torture that she may be subjected to and not to give in to physical pain:

Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They *countered* him. When they *counter* you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. (397)

She only responds if someone calls her by her assumed identity, Upi Mejhen. She remembers how the conflict with the moneylender Surja Sahu erupted. He was unwilling to give water to the lowly tribals while he dug up two tubewells and three wells within the compounds of his two houses. The patience of the tribals lost easily as those were the days of drought. As a

result they tied him up and had their revenge on him. Thereafter the police officials reached Bakuli and a bloodied conflict ensued. Thereafter Dulna and Dopdi flee the scene and decide to choose a fugitive existence in order to fulfil a higher and noble purpose:

Then it was decided that Dopdi and Dulna would work around the Jharkhani belt. Dulna had explained to Dopdi, Dear this is best! We won't get family and children this way. But who knows? Landowners and moneylenders and policemen might one day be wiped out! (399)

Even as her mind is plagued by the happenings of the past she does not lose consciousness of the present in which she was being followed by someone who knew her actual name.

Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Majhi's tactical psyche depicts in practice, what Ranajit Guha, holds to be the case with tribal insurgency. Reduced to a subaltern existence, these tribals did not engage in a blind revolt against their systemic oppression, rather they carefully planned their activities and revolted only when they were sure of their deeds and had well-planned the routes of their escape:

For his (the peasant) subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable-and even desirable-by tradition') To rebel was indeed to destroy many of those familiar signs which he had learned to read and manipulate in order to extract a meaning out of the harsh world around him and live with it. The risk in 'turning things upside down' under these conditions was indeed so great that he could hardly afford to engage in such a project in a state of absent-mindedness. (Guha 45)

This presence of mind is what Dopdi displays when she hears her name being called in the dense forest of Jharkhani. What she thinks of is not how to safeguard herself but to alert her fellow tribals so that the noble cause for which they began their struggle remains unhampered. But this time, she is not so fortunate to trick the soldier at her back and is apprehended.

Senanayak is both "triumphant and despondent" at her arrest. He had become one with the enemy and destroyed her but what he is unhappy about is the failure of his theory in which he supported the struggle of the tribals from the point of view of "field hands" such as Dopdi. Meanwhile, Dopdi still follows the premeditated procedure for a tribal in the case of imminent arrest and surrenders after ululating thrice with the full might of her being. Thereafter she was rigorously questioned regarding the whereabouts of her people who were still in hiding, but to no effect. Ultimately, Senanayak leaves after commanding his battalion to 'make her' and 'do the needful'. Then begins a long brutal episode of sexual harassment and physical torture in which she is stripped off her dignity and 'made':

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? (401)

Her subaltern status is rendered doubly vulnerable on account of her gender and the soldiers take turns having intercourse with her submissive body. They cross all shatter all boundaries of humanity and treat her like a piece of lifeless meat: "Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven – then Draupadi had passed out." (401) The savagery does not stop here and after a small interval a flesh-hungry soldier seems to be ogling at her naked female form. Thereafter another series of having forced intercourse with her begins and she is abused to the maximum inhumane levels possible:

She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. Goes on. 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. (401)

She victimized throughout the course of the night and becomes an object for the men to devour and express their masculinity upon. There is absolutely no remorse in them because they had grasped the fruit of their victory, after rigorous and fatiguing labour and they had to consume it voraciously so that all their hardship in capturing it may be compensated.

The shocking jolt to the system comes at the climax of the story when even after such intense and debilitating torture, Draupadi's spirits are unbroken and she walks formidably towards Senanayak, naked and wounded. The manner in which she has been used as an object for soldiers' sexual gratification is a cause of shame for their animalistic selves and not her. It is she who has been wronged and abused:

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? (402)

Discussing this climactic encounter scene, Bhowal likens it to the "ingredients of the ethical encounter as posited by Emmanuel Levinas, as well as Badiou's essential encounter." (123) This 'other' in Draupadi is baffling for Senanayak's 'self' and he feels paralysed facing her

naked body in sharp defiance of his formal authority. But Mahasweta Devi is against this treatment of tribals as ‘Other’ and so is Badiou. In Badiou’s sense Draupadi’s final facing of Senanayak bears properties of an ‘event’ and an ‘essential encounter’. (125) This is so because what happens here is outside the range of regular laws of such a situation. It is highly unexpected that after being sexually wounded and ‘made’ during the course of a night, a subaltern can just stand up boldly to face the dominating system and its menacing representative in Senanayak. This event bears a singularity in that it is hard to find similar examples of such a situation in the “sphere of existing knowledge.” (125) She finally lays the first stroke at the oppressive and deeply patriarchal system when she pushes the Senanayak aside by her mutilated breasts alone:

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, counter me – come on, counter me – ? (402)

The story’s open-ended structure depicts not only that the authority of the mechanical force had been kicked hard but also signals the liberation which accompanies such coercion and may become the cause for a severe future overturn.

In her introductory note to the story, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes that the character is introduced to the readers between two versions of her name: Dopdi and Draupadi. The archetypal reference to the legendary Draupadi of the Mahabharata is crucial, however, it must not be taken to imply deep correlation since there are significant differences. Spivak comments:

The ancient Draupadi is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic Mahabharata. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India. The tribes predate the Aryan invasion. They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names. Neither the interdiction nor the significance of the name, however, must be taken too seriously. 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. It is the killing of this mistress’ husband that sets going the events of the story. (387)

That the name ‘Draupadi’ has a role to play in the narrative, is beyond question. The mythological character too was subjugated to public humiliation when after losing her in a gambling game, her five husbands surrendered her to the *Kauravas* who then attempted to disrobe her in the court full of men, her husbands among them. Though, there are differences in her story and the Dopdi of Mahasweta Devi’s story. The mythological Draupadi stands as

an example of polyandry whereas Dopdi is devotedly married to a single husband. Dopdi's husband exacts severe revenge on Surja Sahu for eyeing his wife in a lascivious manner, whereas the mythological *Pandavas* let their wife be subject to open disgracing. The mythological Draupadi is able to safeguard her dignity on account of Lord Krishna's intervention, who keeps on supplying more cloth to cover her body, so that Duryodhana is ultimately exhausted in his attempt to disrobe her. But, Dopdi Meihen is not so fortunate to escape her public humiliation for she has no saviour to protect her. Moreover, she suffers agonizing mutilation of her physical self and is toyed around by hordes of men. But, Spivak also states that it would be a mistake to read the story as a refutation of the ancient legend for Dopdi surpasses the legendary character and stands tall as both "a palimpsest and a contradiction." The subaltern experience of the story reemphasizes the absence of an external force to defend the rights of dignity and liberty of the tribals but also serves as a ray of hope in setting an example where a marginalized woman comes out as her own savior, if not at the physical level, then at least, at the level of the soul and an indomitable spirit.

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