

Resistance of the Subaltern: A Study of Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Abstract: The postcolonial intervention in culture and ideology is often enacted through reclaiming certain lost, elided over, previously unrepresented subjects of history. The site of this transformative endeavour, which seeks to put new subjects on the discursive map of nations, is often the act of revisionist historiography in both history and literature. Mahashweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* is a brilliant act of revisionist historiography in which she places a tribal woman – a subaltern – centre stage and casts her in a role that is both traditional and revolutionary. Resistance is an unstructured response to repression and it is a counter hegemonic move which is the core of Mahashweta Devi's writings. *Draupadi* is a defiant militant heroine who confronts and challenges her oppressors even when unarmed. This paper attempts to analyse Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi* as a text representing the heroic resilience and resistance of a "gendered" subaltern, that brings out an entire paradigm shift.

Keywords: Subaltern, resistance, Postcolonial, historiography, repression, hegemonic, dispossessed, neocolonisation, bourgeois, deconstruct, marginal, semiotics, epistemological.

The term 'subaltern' was popularised by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist in the 1920s and 1930s as a surrogate for the term "proletarian class". It refers to the colonised/oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. The term has a relevance to the study of Third World countries, especially to India. In the Preface to *Subaltern Studies* Vol. 1, Ranjit Guha propounds a working definition of "subaltern" :

The word 'subaltern'... stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, of inferior rank. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. (Guha, vii).

The subaltern, therefore, represents a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. It stands for the marginalized, repressed and the peripheral. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her much acclaimed writing "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in a way, entrusts the responsibility on the intellectual class of society to represent the subalterns by raising their suppressed voices. Postcolonial fictional narrative takes up issues of cultural discrimination and oppression faced by different subaltern groups as main aspects of social reality. It has resulted in the production of texts or writings that voice the repression and problematic experiences of those who are subjected to the process of exclusion in a supposedly unified and cosmopolitan world. Postcolonial discourse is concerned with the reassessment of the relationship between the definer and the defined. The postmodernist discursive ethos has given rise to several

problematizing strategies including questioning, deconstructive readings, reinsertions of the silenced voices and counter-historiographical positionings. 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. Mahashweta Devi, a daring and tireless political activist, indefatigable interventionist journalist and creative writer, is widely acknowledged as one of India's foremost literary personalities. She is a writer who writes with an eye towards changing the ideological bases of culture and is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. Mahashweta Devi has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies. Her fictional narratives are very close to subalternist notion of historiography. In her fiction Mahashweta Devi excavates and revises the mainstream history which has miserably failed to account for the voices of the subaltern.

Resistance is an unstructured response to repression and it is a counter hegemonic move which is the core of Mahashweta Devi's writings. In her writings Mahashweta Devi champions the rights of the exploited and the oppressed bonded labourers, sharecroppers and the dispossessed tribal communities both in her state and all over India. She advocates for the political and economic mobilization of such severely marginalized tribal groups like the Mundas, Lodhas and Kherias of West Bengal. She wants her work to be read as a plea for the insertion of tribals into the Indian mainstream from which they have been hitherto excluded. Mahashweta Devi's writing voices her "demand for the recognition of the tribal as a citizen of independent India with an advanced cultural heritage". (*Imaginary Maps*, xvii). By centering the tribals' struggle in her works, Mahashweta Devi reinscribes the marginalized history of the subaltern into the national/postcolonial historiography. In her writings highlighting the plight of the tribal people, Mahashweta Devi's main intention is to expose the stranglehold of feudalism over the land and poor sections. She is preoccupied with the documentation of the history of exploitation of the innocent. Her stories deal with the material reality of the hard life of the tribals under nationalism and their neocolonisation by the mainstream of India. She says :

The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel . . . the mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel . . . They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities . . . they are denied everything . . . That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal world ... I repay them their honour. (*Imaginary Maps*, 3)

Mahashweta Devi's works lend themselves to readings within sociological critical framework. She says in one of her interviews : "I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. The sense of duty is an obsession". (Sree, 99). She considers it to be the duty of a writer to fight against the separatist forces in the society. She identifies the real demon in the system as the neo-colonial practices of the post-independence period which is no less oppressive to the poor and the

subaltern than the coloniser's machinery. Mahashweta Devi's writings not only give voice to India's marginalized tribal people but also stress the abject subordination of women in Indian society. Her most memorable characters are often women - Draupadi, Doulati, Mary, Jashoda, Sanichari etc. These women are the oppressed of society, marginalized in many ways. Yet they are strong women with courage to face upto their condition or defy it. Scholars see her powerful tales of exploitation and struggle as extremely rich sites of feminist discourse. The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s has lot of important influence on Mahashweta Devi's work. The Naxalite movement was a leftist militant movement which first started in the late 1960s in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal as a rural rebellion but soon gained momentum as it spread through the city and students and middle-class intellectuals joined the uprising against the existent bourgeois system. In the spring of 1967, there was a successful peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area in the northern part of West Bengal. According to Marcus Franda:

Unlike most other areas of West Bengal, where peasant movements are led solely by middle-class leadership from Calcutta, Naxalbari has spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes, including tribal cultivators. The peculiar coalition of peasant and intellectual sparked off a number of Naxalbaris all over India. (*Breast Stories*, 1).

Mahashweta Devi points to this movement as the first major event that she felt an urge and an obligation to document. Mahashweta Devi, in her much acclaimed short story *Draupadi*, focuses on the Naxalbari movement and recounts the tribal uprising to claim the land which is their own. *Draupadi* was first published in her collection of short stories in Bengali entitled *Agnigarbha* or *Fire in the Depth* (1978). The English reading world got to appreciate the work through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation. In *Draupadi*, Mahashweta Devi makes race, class, and gender "signify" in a way, that a tribal woman whose race, gender and class, had hardly met with much representation in literature and discourse, becomes not only the seminal focus of a story, but also of history, that is both contemporary and resonant of the mythical. The story has as its backdrop a successful peasant rebellion in Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal. The text operates on multiple levels. Draupadi, or Dopdi as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel - a tribal naxal revolutionary. Through the conflation of the Dopdi of the story with the mythical Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, Mahashweta Devi not only grants the tribal protagonist of her story, epic status, but also suggests her continuity with the mythical Draupadi, who as she informs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in an interview, was a tribal woman. In an interview quoted in *Imaginary Maps*, Mahashweta Devi tells Gayatri Spivak:

Remember, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is a black woman. She must have been a tribal. In the State of Himachal Pradesh, we still find the sort of fraternal polyandry that Draupadi was supposed to have practised in the *Mahabharata*. (i)

By insisting that the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* was a tribal woman, Mahashweta Devi seems to want to suggest the unbroken history of the tribal people in India, people whose history and culture have been systematically ignored in all books of Indian history, and whose land and forests have been systematically wrenched from them. Dopdi is hunted down by the government machinery in their attempt to subjugate these groups. The government officials use all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder, and rape but Dopdi is not easily cowed. After continuous rape and abuse, deprived of food and water, the story ends with a magnificent final scene in which Draupadi faces her abusers stark naked, battered and bruised all over, but fiercely strong, proud and defiant. It is obvious that the name Draupadi is derived from the epic *Mahabharata*, where Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. Lord Krishna comes to her aid and saves her from becoming a victim of male lust. But Draupadi in Mahashweta Devi's short story is a subaltern - an aboriginal, easily stripped by men and gang raped by them. However, in a heroic act of counter-resistance she refuses to be clothed and confronts her tormentors with tremendous defiance almost frightening them out of their wits. The story begins at the moment when the Naxalite movement in northern West Bengal is in its last phase and the army surrounds the peasant insurgents many of whom are killed. From Draupadi her name becomes Dopdi probably because the uneducated lot cannot pronounce a Sanskrit name. Draupadi and her husband, Dulna, are comrades in arms and very much in love with each other. Earlier to this, Dopdi and Dulna had acted as chief instigators in the murder of Suraj Sahu, their landlord, who had occupied all upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought thus depriving the untouchables from the right even to draw water from wells. Following Suraj Sahu's murder, the police cordoned off three villages and machine-gunned a number of insurgents. Dopdi and Dulna, however, managed to escape by laying on the ground, faking their own death. They had then joined the militant insurgents operating from forests. They had acted as efficient couriers for the militant activists constantly travelling and communicating vital information. Both Dopdi and Dulna were on the hit list of the Special Forces but somehow evaded them on account of their superb skill in the art of hiding in thick forests. Dulna got at last killed while drinking water from a pool in Jhadkhani forest. Thereafter, the special forces led by Senanayak, the seasoned soldier, focussed themselves on searching Dopdi Mejhen - alive or dead. Dopdi's posters announcing a reward on her head were everywhere :

Name Dopdi Mejhen, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankdajhad, scar on the shoulder (Dopdi was shot) information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees ... (Devi: 2002, 149)

She even has a police dossier:

Dossier: Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhum, Bardhaman, Murshidabad, and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous Operation Bakuli, when three villages were cordoned off and

machine gunned, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main criminals. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought, not surrendering those three young men to the police. (149).

With Dulna dead, Dopdi now faces the enemy alone in the jungle. That she is a woman of epic energies and resolve becomes obvious from her ceaseless activity even during most difficult times : “Dopdi kept walking. Villages and fields, bush and rock - Public Works Department markers - sound of running steps at her back”. (157) Dopdi is determined to carry on the job left undone by her dead husband and his comrades making the violent message “Ma-ho” come true. She also resolves not to utter the name of any of her comrades to the police under any situation, “I swear by my life. By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told.” (159) and the narrator adds - “If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue” (155). When Dopdi is apprehended she knows that she has been caught and identified. Before she readies herself for the capture, she must warn others :

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards 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 Jhadrkhani forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far. (160)

Dopdi is captured and brought to the police camp and is questioned for about an hour. Following Senanayak's instruction - “Make her. Do the needful”. (160), she is gang raped again and again by the men in uniform throughout the night. Her breasts are bitten raw, nipples torn and her swollen lips bleed profusely. Unable to endure the torture, she fell unconscious. But on regaining consciousness she finds the guards resuming their duty of making her :

Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her arse and waist. Her own blood . . . How many came to make her? . . . How many? Four - five - six - seven... She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. (160)

Draupadi has to wait endlessly throughout the night for the end of this torture. Next morning Senanayak orders that Dopdi be presented before him. Dopdi is brought before Senanayak. However, the mutilation and violent abuse of her body do not make her surrender abjectly. Despite incredible thirst she refuses to accept any water and pours it on the ground. She even refuses to be clothed and prefers to stand stark naked in broad day light with her head held high before Senanayak and his men. The nervous guards trail behind and Draupadi confronts Senanayak :

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds . . . Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, 'The object of your search, Dopdi Meihen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me'? (161)

Draupadi's refusal to be clothed stands as a symbol of political resistance as well as the challenging of the patriarchal norms. The guards intend sexual abuse to be the best way to handle a female Naxalite but Draupadi subverts this notion. With the horrid spectacle of her violently raped body and blood oozing out of her ravaged lips, Draupadi bursts into an indomitable laughter that completely bewilders Senanayak. She spits a bloody gob at Senanayak's white bush shirt and states in a shrill, high-pitched and sarcastic tone :

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man... There is not 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? (161-162)

In defiance of the violent torture inflicted on her, Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and the "fully armed" officer is for the first time terribly afraid to stand before an unarmed target". (162) Draupadi makes her mangled body a powerful weapon of resistance. Her defiant attitude overwhelms and frightens Senanayak. Senanayak, an expert in tracking down insurgents and capturing them, is confronted with an adversary he can neither comprehend nor destroy. Mahashweta Devi names her protagonist after the classical character but makes this illiterate, poor, tribal woman more powerful than her counterpart from the epic. The mythical Draupadi in *Mahabharata* is saved from public humiliation by the timely intervention of Lord Krishna. Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi lives in a world where there is no miracle to save her. She, therefore, has to become an agent of her own deliverance. Dopdi, as she is apprehended, tortured, gangraped, brutalized all through the night, neither expects nor receives salvation from any quarter. She would not wash, drink water or 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 and fear, only serve to consolidate the operating relations of power. Mahashweta Devi's Dopdi ironically reverses the semiotics of these signs to produce a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare among the male violators. In the final section of the story Draupadi, the subaltern, emerges as empowered, one who can challenge her assailants even when unarmed. Draupadi's final resistance brings out an entire paradigm shift. She "does not let her nakedness shame her, her torture intimidate her, or her rape diminish her". (Rajan, 352). She displays an unusual form of resistance by subverting the gaze in such a way that it is her oppressors who are made to feel the shame. The reversal of traditional gender and authority roles is complete. Senanayak and the army, the dominant males, the tormentors and authority figures, now "stand before" (162) Dopdi as though before a mighty and powerful force. She survives the ordeal triumphantly and is thereby empowered to "become" the goddess. Her tormentors are now "terribly afraid" (162). The crucial factor in the transformation of Dopdi into an 'agent' is her

coming to terms with the fact that contingencies, such as the ones that she is faced with, call for a radical departure from the identity fashioned and inscribed by patriarchy and male authority and the appropriation of a powerful female identity. Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi is the representative of the "gendered sabalterns" who ultimately resist, "speak" and make themselves heard when pushed to the margins.

Mahashweta Devi's creative works function as counter-literary and counter-cultural consciousness formation instruments whereby the non-heroes emerge as heroes and certain mythico-historical narratives get liberated from their conventional epistemological binds. In "Draupadi" by placing a tribal woman center stage and casting her in a role that is both traditional and revolutionary, Mahashweta Devi not only rewrites some dimensions of the epic from the standpoint of gender, but also from the standpoint of history and myth. In a way she also addresses, perhaps unconsciously, a lacuna in early subaltern historiography, which was entirely silent on the question of woman.

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