

# Voices of the Other in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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**Abstract-** Set against the backdrop of Naxalbari Uprising in 1967, Mahasweta Devi's short-story "Draupadi" deals with lives of tribal peasants and their exploitation. Dopdi Mejhen is on the run and police has put a price worth one hundred rupees on her head. Dopdi along with other poor peasants kills a landlord for not sharing water with them during a burning draught. Devi's story ends with Dopdi's resistance to put on clothes after Senanayak's men rape her.

The proposed study will discuss two aspects of Devi's short-story. First is the debate on victimization of poor tribals. Political victimization of untouchable peasants in a feudal social structure will be under scrutiny. Also, this paper will inquire into rape as an instrument of victimization. By damaging and depressing the psychological state of the enemy, rape becomes a perfect modern tool of psychological aggression. Second aspect that the proposed dissertation will examine is the resistance to suppression. The story displays resistance to feudalism and dominating authorities such as patriarchy. To explore the theme of resistance, the present study will take into consideration peasants' revolt against Surja Sahu, an unnamed boy who bites off his tongue when police capture him, and Dopdi resurrecting like a phoenix after she is gang-raped. In the end, I hypothesize that while this story discusses victimization and resistance, it also calls for paving ways to form better social relations in future. This paper could open up avenues for further research on the works of this postcolonial author from the perspectives of Critical Race Theory, Dalit Aesthetics and Gender Studies.

**Index Terms-** Naxalbari Uprising, victimization, suppression, feudalism, resistance, postcolonial, "Draupadi"

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi is the champion of the cause of poor, downtrodden and marginalized. It is through the sufferings of woman characters in her writings that Mahasweta Devi speaks for human dignity and respectability. In addition, problems like demands for shelter, drinking water, minimum wages, roads, schools, higher shares of crops, etc. are the hallmarks of her fiction. Devi claims in her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire) that life "is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in the mere party politics" (Devi 8).

Devi's story "Draupadi" deals with lives of tribal peasants and their exploitation. Dopdi Mejhen is on the run and police has put a price worth one hundred rupees on her head. Dopdi along with her husband and many other poor tribals has killed a landlord for not sharing water with the peasants during a burning draught. As a result, armed forces chase these rebels down. They encounter Dulna Majhi, Dopdi's husband. The search for

Dopdi ends when her comrades betray her. Senanayak, who is the representative of governmental authority in the story, asks his men to sexually assault her. They rape her multiple times throughout the night. In the morning, when her rapists offer clothes to cover her naked body, Dopdi refuses to put them on. She tears the clothes with her teeth. Every man present there starts fearing this unarmed woman. The story ends with Dopdi confronting Senanayak naked, calling into question the morality and modesty of her rapists.

This paper discusses two aspects of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi". The first is the debate on victimization of tribal 'others'. Victimization of untouchable peasants in a feudal social structure will be under scrutiny. In the story, rape is the most important instrument of victimization. Sexual violence threatens the welfare of a woman, her dignity and rights. Women who are subjected to gang rapes, suffer many physical, mental, psychological and societal problems. Many critics hold a view that rape is a means of psychological warfare used in humiliating the enemy. By damaging and depressing the psychological states of the other force, rape becomes a perfect modern tool of psychological aggression.

The second aspect examines the subversion of authorities. The story displays the subversion of feudalism, governmental authority and patriarchy. To explore the theme of subversion, the paper will take into consideration peasants' revolt against Surja Sahu, an unnamed boy who bites off his tongue when police capture him, killings of landlords and Dopdi resurrecting like a phoenix after she is gang-raped. In the end, I hypothesize that while this story discusses victimization and subversion, it also calls for new strategies of imagining social relations in postcolonial India.

## II. BACKGROUND

The year 1967 marked a new beginning in revolutionary armed struggle in India. The Naxalite movement began with relatively insignificant attack by some landless peasant in the foothills of Himalayas. In the year 1967, in a village called Naxalbari, police came to investigate the reports of looting of food grains and guns from the landlords of the village. When the police marched in to the village, villagers shot arrows killing the Inspector who was heading the team. With the arrival of reinforcement, police demanded the surrender of those guilty of shooting. For their surprise, reply came with more volleys of shooting. Two men, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal started this tiny revolution in a small village of Darjeeling, West Bengal. "They were" as Neelesh Misra

and Rahul Pandita would argue in their 2016 book *The Absent State* “among a handful of men who believed it was fruitless to try to change the social order by peaceful means and they spread their message quite effectively among discontented land laborers. ... The sickle with which they had slaved away in the fields became a potent weapon against oppression” (12). Thus began what Peking Radio would later call the spring thunder in Terai. Undoubtedly, the massive crack down by Indian armed forces smashed the movement in a very small amount of time, yet the spirit of the movement had travelled far deep into the heart and mind of every discontented sufferer, carrying the legacy of movement forward. As a result, this went on to become what Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister of India called ‘the biggest internal security threat’ our country faces (Uttam Sengupta).

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In her Foreword to Mahasweta Devi’s story, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims that the story questions “legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husband) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot)” of Mahabharata’s Draupadi by first placing Dopdi “in a comradeship, activist, monogamous marriage” and then later in a “situation of multiple rape” (Spivak 387). Spivak points that rather than saving her modesty through divine male intervention as it happens in case of Draupadi in Mahabharata, Devi’s story insists that this is the place where male authority comes to an end.

Similarly, Dr. Nidhi Sharma has described “Draupadi” as reinterpretation of the mythic Draupadi of Mahabharata. Dr. Nidhi argues that “prehistoric narratives” are re-told and re-shaped from the perspective of “the oppressed voices” (Sharma 5). She contends that in Mahasweta Devi’s story Draupadi is not a passive figure, like Draupadi in Mahabharata who is dependent on male glory for her safety. Rather, Draupadi is an “agent of nation’s ethnocultural and historical ethos” and a metaphor for “empowerment” in the story (Sharma 6). Sharma has argued that Draupadi of Mahabharata comes as a weak and helpless figure, seeking help from divine male power. On the other hand, Dopdi emerges as a strong, independent female who is full of “self-respect” and does not let “the patriarchal norms of morality” to dominate her (Sharma, 6).

In her paper “Rape Victims as Today’s Subaltern: Knowledge of the Power of Fecundity in Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi,” Febi Abrams argues that in rape victims are today’s subalterns. Abrams asserts that tribal and

Dalit women are the worst sufferer (Abrams 914). She goes on to say that no one practices “untouchability” when it comes to sex (Abrams 915). For Abrams, Dopdi is a gendered subaltern.

In her paper “Mahasweta Devi’s Rhetoric of Subversion in Draupadi”, Mitali R. Pati discusses Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi” in the light of Postcolonial ruling classes who are “the parodies of their colonial predecessors” (Pati 87). In the story, armed forces are depicted as constantly brutalizing the tribal folks. R. Pati argues that it is “reminiscent of colonial dispatches on ‘native’ rebellions” (Pati 88). Her central argument is that by allowing Draupadi to stand victorious in spite of her brutal gang rape, Mahasweta Devi subverts the authority.

#### **IV. GLIMPSES OF VICTIMIZATION OF THE TRIBALS IN MAHASWETA DEVI’S “DRAUPADI”**

Victimization of the tribals works on many levels in the story. Let’s begin with the suppression of peasants in a feudal social structure. In the story, Surja Sahu is the representative of feudalism. People like Dulna Majhi and Draupadi Mejhen work as indentured laborers for him. Dulna’s grandfather must have taken “a bit of paddy” from Surja Sahu, and Dulna still has to give him “free labour to repay” that debt (Devi 398). Thus, free-labour forms an important part of feudalism. In addition, upper cast landlords do not treat these tribal peasants as humans. Their existence does not matter much to the landlords. In Dickensian terms, these peasants are ‘hands’. Their only job is to work in the fields and keep adding to the landlord’s surplus. In the story, there is a draught in the village. When these “untouchable” peasants go to Surja Sahu to demand for water which he has stored in plenty through “two tube wells and three wells within the compound,” he denies them water for cultivation and asks them to leave (Devi 398). Feudalism thrives on making these poor peasants dependent on the landlords. Surja Sahu does the same in the story.

Devi’s story points out the political victimization of the poor tribals in early 1970. Naxalite uprising of 1967 forms the background of Devi’s story. Peasant rebels kill upper caste landlords and take over their land, granary, guns, “well and tube wells” (Devi 392). Armed forces crack down on these rebels. In her Forewords to the story, Spivak argues that 1971 is a crucial moment in Indian history as India wins its first ever war. And, it is against West Pakistan (Spivak 386). Spivak further points that taking advantage of the “atmosphere of jubilation”

after defeating West Pakistan, “Indian Prime minister was able to crack down with exceptional severity on the Naxalites, destroying the rebellious sections of the rural population” particularly the tribals (Spivak 386). In the story, Devi refers to “*Operation Bakuli*, when three villages were *cordoned off* and *machine gunned*” (Devi 392). Residents of three villages become the targets of armed forces. This shows the dictatorial suppression the Naxalite movement. In addition, if a suspect is hiding in any village, armed forces would burn down the entire village. Tudu speaks out this fear in the story when he informs Dopdi about the “Sahib” who had come to inquire about her. He says, “If they catch you, the village, our huts...” (Devi 397).

Finally, we must analyze rape as an instrument of victimization. Amnesty International describes war/conflict rape as a weapon of war or means of combat used for the purpose of conquering territory by expelling the population from there, decimating the civilians by destroying their links of affiliation, by the spread of AIDS and by eliminating cultural and religious traditions. That’s why Senanayak orders his men, “Make her. *Do the needful*” (Devi 401). On Senanayak’s order, his men rape Dopdi and brutally assault her. Dopdi does not even know how many of them “came to make her” and goes unconscious (Devi 401). Devi writes, “Her breasts were bitten raw, the nipples torn” and her lips were ravaged (401-402). These men assault her to teach her and her tribe a lesson. It is a means of perpetrating fear in the minds of people. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1999 “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present” characterizes “group rape perpetuated by the conquerors” as “a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition” (300).

In case of rape, the situation worsens for woman on the psychological level. Women suffer anxiety disorder (post-traumatic stress syndrome), multiple somatic symptoms, flashbacks, chronic insomnia, self hatred, paranoia, helplessness, sadness, disorientation, isolation, vulnerability and difficulty in re-establishing intimate relationship, shame and anger. These psychological injuries in most cases are long term. Second, the societal relations of a rape victim are disrupted. Stigmatization and isolation are the repercussions of sexual violence.

## V. VOICES OF THE SUBVERSION IN “DRAUPADI”

The story also speaks for the subversion of dominating authorities. First, let's consider the subversion of feudalism. As discussed earlier, 1967's Naxalite uprising is a revolt against the suppression of poor peasants. This uprising in the 1960s should not be considered as an unprecedented event in the history of peasant's revolt. Rather, it is a result of endless peasant rebellions in colonial India. Ranajit Guha (1983) argues in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* that no less than 110 violent peasant uprisings had been recorded between 1783 and 1900 (6). In Devi's story, Surja Sahu is the image of feudal lord. Villagers decide to “put him down” when he denies sharing water with the “untouchable” peasants (Devi 398). Sahu has made Dulna work without wages to repay a petty debt. When the rebellion breaks out Dulna wants to hurt him first. Dopdi, on the other hand, wants to “pull out his eyes” as Sahu has always lusted after her (Devi 398). Thus by putting down Surja, these peasants try to subvert the authority of feudal lords. Also, there are plans to kill other landlords like “Lakkhi Bera and Naran Bera... on the account of the trouble over paying the field hands...” which although stands cancelled (Devi 399). However, this shows how people are not ready to accept any suppression.

“Draupadi” also displays subversion against governmental authority. These rebels start “attacking police station, stealing guns” and “killing law officers, and bureaucrats” (Devi 393). In addition, these rebellious peasants succeed in making these officers suffer psychologically. It is because of Dopdi and Dulna that Captain Arjan Singh becomes schizophrenic. Now, whenever he sees “a black-skinned” tribal, he would faint, saying that they are killing him (393). It's for the first that the authority has started dreading the subject of its oppression.

The authority of police fails when the boy bites off his tongue before the questioning begins. These armed peasants can go to any extent in defending their cause. While people in all the villages know that sheltering police's targets might result in killings and burning down of their houses, still they shelter these people. This exemplifies an outright rejection of police authority.

The ending of the story has multiple meanings and interpretations. After being raped multiple times, when Senanayak's men bring her clothes, she refuses to put them. She tears all her clothes and confronts these men naked. She says: “What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? ... There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of” (Devi 402). Dopdi subverts the politics behind rape in a

war/conflict zones. As discussed earlier, rape creates self hatred, paranoia, helplessness, sadness, disorientation, isolation, vulnerability and difficulty in re-establishing intimate relationship, shame and anger. Also, the societal relations of a rape victim are disrupted. But, Dopdi does not succumb to the aftereffects of rape. Rather, she turns the tables on those who perpetrate crime against her. It is now that Senanayak feels “afraid to stand before” Dopdi (Devi 402). His men do not know what to do when she refuses to cover herself. All of a sudden, these men of authority appear powerless and superficial. Thus, Dopdi succeeds in subverting the authority of armed men.

Dopdi makes it clear that she is not ashamed of standing naked in front of these men. She does not even consider them men. It suggests that if someone does not respect the dignity and modesty of the other human being, he/she should not fall in any gender-category. In addition, covering herself would reaffirm the patriarchal mode of morality that has subjugated women for ages. Instead, Dopdi questions the morality and honor of men by not covering herself.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has dealt with elements of victimization and subversion in the story. It is through this dichotomy that Mahasweta Devi is hinting on something worth considering. That is, the horror and futility of a war that we have waged against our own people which has resulted in many unconstitutional killings and endless socio-political disturbances. Now, it is through improved socio-cultural understanding that we can make sense of our better future.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility” (Longfellow 103). It is important to realize that the way we are handling this horrific problem which has lasted decades will lead us nowhere except for the collateral damage we suffer every day. Unless we own our people as one of us, we shall not see a permanent solution to it. As Nandini Sundar propounds: “Not everyone whom the police term a Naxalite is one, and even more, the police are not entitled to kill everyone who is a Naxalite” (Sundar 346). Similarly, Maoists need to understand, in the name of revolution, killings of security personals and the adivasi ‘informers’ cannot be justified. Violence, which beguiles human minds, deals in death, devastation, ruination, despoliation of social fabrics, moral crisis, consternation, powerlessness and loss: It has never brought peace and stability to society. If there shall exit

something, let there exist an ideological difference, for, it brings the best in any social and political system that is in place. True identity of world's largest democracy lies in the assimilation of such dissenting voices.

Further research can consider analyzing the story from the perspective Critical Race Theory. In addition, story has potentials for research from the standpoints of Dalit Aesthetics and Gender Studies. In the story, tribals are uprooted from their native lands and their identities are in constant flux. This perspective on identities would open new avenues for future research on the story.

## VII. REFERENCES

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