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Draupadi by Mahashweta Devi: Echoes of Patriarchy, Criminology and Conflict

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the role of women in a male-dominated society and their status as mere possessions in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi". Within this narrative, the author boldly criticizes the prevalence of Indian feudalism and sheds light on the government's lack of gratitude. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's translation of "Breast stories" includes three distinct tales: "Draupadi", "Breast Giver", and "Behind the Bodice." Each of these stories revolves around the themes of exploitation and patriarchy. In "Draupadi", Devi vividly portrays the violence endured by the story's protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen. The exploration of Trauma Theory and Cognitive Dissonance in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" delve into various themes such as resistance, subalternity, and gender dynamics. The story vividly portrays Dopdi Mejhen's defiance against both patriarchal and colonial oppression, showcasing her resistance through acts of non-cooperation and radical actions. Devi's narrative deeply examines the trauma experienced by Dopdi Mejhen, a subaltern figure who challenges societal norms and power structures. This analysis applies theories of subalternity, gender performativity, and resistance to shed light on the character's relentless struggle for socioeconomic freedom. Through Dopdi's personal journey, the narrator exposes the prevalent violence, exploitation, and patriarchy within Indian society, emphasizing the intricate nature of trauma and cognitive dissonance within the context of subaltern existence.

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Introduction

Time and again in my writings can be found the reflection of that part of the society which I call the voiceless section of Indian Society. This particular section is not merely illiterate, half-literate and underdeveloped, it is utterly isolated from the mainstream. But without knowing this fragment of Indian society, idea of India remains beyond comprehension. (Mahasweta Devi, 1981, pp. 381-402)

The short story "Draupadi" by Mahasweta Devi serves as a prime example of the intertwining of myth and reality in literature. The utilization of the mythical heroine from The Mahabharata allows for a deep exploration of the Naxalite movement and tribal rights in West Bengal and India during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mahasweta Devi weaves her activism into the narrative, creating a 'historiographic metafiction' that juxtaposes ancient texts with modern context, revealing intricate layers of socio-political-cultural ideologies. This is to delve into how the character of

'Draupadi/Dopdi' embodies both contemporaneity and complexity, showcasing the rebellious consciousness of a tribal-subaltern-peasant-rebel and the emergence of her gendered subaltern ethnic identity. This also delves the portrayal of a woman's position in a male-dominated society and her status as property in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi". Through this narrative, she challenges Indian feudalism and criticizes governmental ingratitude. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's translation of "Draupadi", "Breast Giver", and "Behind the Bodice" in Breast Stories also highlight themes of exploitation and patriarchy. In "Draupadi", Devi sheds light on the violence experienced by the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen.

Mahasweta Devi is a renowned Indian feminist writer who has dedicated her work to advocating for the rights and empowerment of tribal communities in Bengal. As a social activist, she has consistently fought for the marginalized and her characters often confront issues of sexual violence and

abuse. Devi's writings also critique the corruption and injustice prevalent in upper-class society, while vividly portraying the patriarchal system in India.

In the rural setting of Champabhum, located in West Bengal, the tale diverts from the illustrious and regal backdrop of the Mahabharata. Here, the retelling of Draupadi's 'cheelharan' takes place within Devi's story, effectively challenging the conventional narrative that revolves around Draupadi's rescue by Lord Krishna. In Devi's account, Dopdi remains unredeemed, yet she defies the role of a mere victim, assertively asserting her own autonomy, consequently instilling a strong sense of fear within the armed men.

Devi's narrative is set amidst the backdrop of the Naxalite movement (1967-71), the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) in West Bengal, and the ancient Hindu epic of Mahabharata. Through her storytelling, she delves into the intricate politics surrounding Bengali identity and Indian nationhood. The uprising of the tribal community against affluent landlords incurs the wrath of the government, leading to the implementation of Operation Bakuli, aimed at eliminating the so-called tribal rebels. This story serves as a contemporary reinterpretation and reimagining of the ancient mythical text. Within the narrative, we encounter a Santhal woman who has been bestowed with the archetypal name 'Draupadi' by the wife of the oppressive feudal landowner, in what can be perceived as a superficial act of benevolence. This act is often observed from the oppressor's wife towards the tribal bond servant.

Draupadi's mother, who used to toil as a laborer for husking crops under the landholder named Surya Sahu, pronounced her name as 'Dopdi' in their local dialect. It is plausible that in the tribal language, the Sanskritized version of 'Draupadi' cannot be articulated by Draupadi and her people. Alternatively, the tribalized form, 'Dopdi,' may be the authentic name for the ancient Draupadi.

Nevertheless, Draupadi embodies the essence of both names, carrying within her the distinctiveness associated with the oppressed yet bold and proud mythical woman, while simultaneously representing the exploited indigenous tribe of her nation. However, her name remains an enigma to others, as evidenced by a conversation between two uniformed men.

"First Livery: What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name? Second: Draupadi Mejhen.... Surja Sahu's wife gave her the name." (Ibid, p. 392)

Draupadi revolves around the life of Dopdi Mehjen, a woman belonging to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. She assumes the role of a modern-day Robin Hood, alongside her husband Dhulna, as they eliminate wealthy landlords and seize control of their wells, which serve as the primary water source for the village. In an attempt to suppress these rebellious tribal groups, the government resorts to various methods such as abduction, murder, and even rape. Dopdi falls into the clutches of Officer Senanayak, who orders his army officers to sexually assault her in order to extract information about the uprising of the rebels.

Paradoxically, the very officers who desecrated her physical integrity demand that she conceals herself when she has finished with their heinous acts. Firmly, Dopdi removes her garments and approaches officer Senanayak, "...completely naked. Her thigh and pubic hair tangled with dried blood. Two bosoms. Two wounds." Senanayak is taken aback by her rebellious nature as she confronts him "with her hand on her hip" as "the target of [his] pursuit" and declares, "There is not a single man present here that should evoke my shame."

However, Dopdi's defeat came at the hands of Senanayak's astuteness, as a reward of two hundred rupees was announced in her name. For any impoverished villager, this amount seemed enticing without a doubt. Additionally, there were undercover agents and the enemies' relatives keeping a close watch on her every move. Despite disguising herself as Upi Mejhen, she was apprehended by the army with the assistance of Rotoni Sahu, Surja Sahu's brother, along with two mixed-race tribal individuals named Shomai and Budhna. Adhering to the leaders' teachings that "no comrade should sacrifice others for their own sake" (Ibid, p. 400) and driven by the memory of her deceased husband, Dopdi silently swore not to reveal any information about their rebellious activities, stating, "I swear on my life. By my life, Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be disclosed." (Ibid, p. 399) Dopdi surrendered, letting out a deep ululation as if to make the entire world aware of the tragedy.

"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. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far." (Ibid, p. 401)

In the preface of *Agnigarbha*, Devi expresses her belief that life should not be reduced to mere calculations, and that humans should not exist solely for the purpose of engaging in politics. In

the introduction to *Agnigarbha* Devi wrote, "Life is not mathematics and human beings are not made for the sake of politics. I want to change in the Present social system and do not

believe in mere party politics." (4) She aims to bring about change in the current social system and rejects the notion of engaging in politics for the sake of it. Devi's writing style is both captivating and thought-provoking. She employs various techniques to vividly portray her characters within the literary landscapes she creates. According to Malini Bhattacharya, "there are few writers of her stature today in whose career creative writing and activism have been so closely intertwined." [EPW, 10 May 1997-1003]

There are very few writers today who possess Devi's level of talent and whose careers seamlessly blend creative writing with activism. Devi fearlessly exposes the harsh realities of social economics and politics that often remain hidden from public view. In the collection of stories titled *Breast Stories*, translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, three tales stand out: *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver* (Stanadayini), and *Behind the Bodice* (Choli ke Pichhe). These stories all revolve around the themes of exploitation and patriarchy.

In the midst of the Jharkhand Forest, a young tribal woman named Dopadi, aged twenty-seven, fights for her very existence, desperately seeking sustenance and water. She has gained notoriety as a wanted fugitive, pursued relentlessly by authorities for various offenses. Hailing from the Santhal tribe, Dopadi finds herself entangled in a web of danger as she attempts to evade the special forces. Her alleged crimes include the murder of Surja Sahu and his son, as well as the occupation of wells and tube wells traditionally reserved for the upper-caste during a severe drought. The army has been deployed to quell the uprising of tribal communities against the oppressive systems of feudalism and caste hierarchy.

Throughout history, women have consistently been subjected to exploitation, degradation, and objectification. When Dopdi Mejhen is apprehended, she is dehumanized and reduced to nothing more than a physical body. The process of commodification begins as soon as she is captured by the

policemen. "Mr. Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics," (P.393) Mr. Senanayak, an experienced Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics, gives orders before dinner, instructing others to make her comply with their demands. Subsequently, Dopdi is subjected to a horrific act of rape by a group of policemen. The brutality inflicted upon her is unimaginable, as she is shamed, her tears flowing, and her breasts brutally assaulted, leaving her nipples torn and raw. The sheer number of perpetrators overwhelms her, causing her to lose consciousness.

When the military apprehends an individual, they employ various methods to extract hidden information, often resorting to brutal physical and psychological tactics. However, when the detainee is a woman, the torture takes on a gendered nature. This is exemplified in Dopdi's interrogation at the army camp, which was followed by a night of gang-rape. In this instance, Dopdi's experience mirrors that of the legendary Draupadi, who faced similar gender-based subjugation in the Kaurava court at the hands of Duryodhana and his cohorts. Draupadi's public humiliation in the epic highlights the complex dynamics of power politics. The poet vividly portrays her helplessness as she is forced to appear before the Kuru assembly while menstruating, wearing only one garment, and residing in the Kaurava household as a guest. To her dismay, she learns that despite having five husbands, none can protect her: "nathvatianathvat". Her identity as a woman renders her an easy target for the Kauravas to assert their authority. The epic subtly suggests that while Duryodhana, instigated by Karna, exposes his thighs to Draupadi, his true intention is to undermine the spirits of the Pandavas, particularly Bhima, by violating their shared wife.

"Duryodhana, desirous of encouraging the son of Radha and insulting Bhima, quickly uncovered his left thigh that was like unto the stem of a plantain tree or the trunk of an elephant and which was graced with every auspicious sign and endowed with the strength of thunder, and showed it to Draupadi in her very sight." (Ganguly, Bk I, p. 375)

Despite enduring the horrific experience of being gang raped by the authorities in an attempt to force her to betray her comrades, she remains resilient and unwavering. Despite the shame and objectification, she faces, her spirit remains unbreakable. Wilson highlights her strength, stating that she defiantly refuses to conceal herself, instead utilizing her ravaged body as a powerful tool to condemn the man who authorized the heinous act of gang rape against her. "Refusing to cover herself, she uses her ravaged body as a weapon by which to censure the man who has sanctioned the gang rape as a weapon against her." (P. 144)

Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi is a reimagining of the character Draupadi from the epic Mahabharata. While Draupadi faces one villain who attempts to violate her modesty by pulling her saree, Dopdi encounters numerous villains. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi creates a stark contrast. In the mythological tale, Draupadi is saved by the divine intervention of Krishna, whereas tribal Dopdi is subjected to torture and subjugation by the patriarchal society. However, Dopdi emerges as an incredibly strong and powerful character. Despite facing immense oppression, she remains resolute and unwavering. "For the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid." (P.402). This quote emphasizes that ultimately, the dominant male is forced to feel inferior in the presence of a female. Dopdi's voice diminishes the authority of the male power structure. Throughout history, those in positions of power have

consistently exploited and oppressed those who are deemed inferior. This theme is also evident in Devi's works.

Draupadi/ Dopdi embodies the essence of the "female subaltern consciousness" that plays a crucial role in the history of rebellious mobilization in India, often involving tribals and peasants. While tribal uprisings were not officially recognized as anti-colonial movements, various indigenous leaders mobilized different tribes to support the nation's freedom struggle. For instance, the tribal rebellion led by Jitusanthal of Maldah in 1921 coincided with the non-cooperation movement led by Gandhiji. On the other hand, peasant insurgency has relied on a strong sense of community to challenge entrenched feudal systems, merging self-consciousness with class-consciousness. Dopdi, as a Naxalite "comrade," challenges binary oppositions and foregrounds her class-struggle without neglecting the gender-struggle. Proud of her tribal heritage, she uses it as a weapon against the oppressive state military. Her story illustrates how the hunted "object" transforms into a powerful "subject" through the politics of sexuality, echoing Derrida's idea of self-possession through giving oneself. "sometimes by contrast the woman by giving herself, gives-herself-as, and thus simulates and assures for herself possessivemastery..."(Derrida, 1978, pp. 109-11)

Mahasweta, throughout her life, served as a columnist for various journals while also being a prolific writer of stories, novels, and essays. She maintained a close connection with the marginalized tribal and rural communities in India, using her writing as a tool to denounce the ongoing oppression by the State against the indigenous population. She emphasized the importance of documenting the present reality without bias, shedding light on issues such as hunger, landlessness, and the exploitation of the poor through debt-labor and bonded labor practices. By incorporating oral history, mythology, folklore, official language, regional dialects, colloquialisms, and slang in her works, Mahasweta emerged as a unique female intellectual deeply committed to ethical responsibility. Her narratives skillfully intertwined themes of gender and class repression, with characters like Draupadi symbolizing a strong voice of resistance. As Mahasweta told G. Collu: I respect Indian tribals because they are much more civilized and sophisticated than we are. Their own social codes say... a woman's place is of honour... they are people all India has exploited like anything because they are black, because they don't speak the language. Draupadi is much more of a woman, much more polished, courageous than many others.(Collu, 1998, pp.147-148)

Certainly, in her final laughter, Draupadi/ Dopdi, a resilient tribal Naxalite woman fighter, truly embodies the concept of an "organic intellectual," as explained by Spivak in a distinct manner.

When the subaltern "speaks" in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he/she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual.(Landry and Maclean, 1996, p. 271)

Both characters exhibit intelligence, resilience, strategic thinking, and radical behavior. They are depicted as embodiments of Shakti, representing feminine power in unconventional ways beyond the roles of mother or daughter. Draupadi in the epic attempted to resist sexual abuse by challenging the perpetrator, questioning the ethical justifications of her husbands' actions (especially the eldest one), and confronting their adversaries. Conversely, as a Naxalite rebel, Devi's Dopdi expressed her anger and frustration through powerful cries, warning her fellow fighters

hidden in strategic locations across the Jharkhani forest range. This defiance can be interpreted as her refusal to succumb to potential mistreatment by the authorities after her capture. Dopdi's ululation, typically a rural female vocal tradition during ceremonies, became a symbol of protest against oppression. Despite facing interrogation, Dopdi remained silent about the revolutionary movement and endured physical abuse by male captors. While Draupadi's polyandrous marriage was replaced by Dopdi's multiple rapes orchestrated by the Senanayak, both instances reflect the underlying political support for the subjugation of women. In The Mahabharata, the elders of the Kuru assembly failed to intervene in the Pandava queen's assault, mirroring the state's negligence in protecting women from violence. Rape emerges as a tool of political punishment in both narratives, highlighting the systemic oppression faced by women. Mahasweta Devi's work Draupadi presents an "affirmative deconstruction" through the reexamination of the epic myth of 'Draupadi' as a diverse symbol, shifting it from its traditional context to a modern setting. This involves a form of reinterpretation, known as "double reading," aimed at challenging the prevailing male-centered interpretations. The subversion of dominant perceptions on masculinity is evident in Dopdi's pivotal question, "Are you a man?" followed by her defiant declaration, "Come on, counter me," which serves as the subaltern's ultimate resistance. Her writing, including works like Aranyer Adhikar, Hajar Churashir Ma, Operation? Basai Tudu, Agnigarbha, Stanadayini, and others, was constantly driven by a deep historical sense and its implications for the everyday lives of the masses. Draupadi, as part of this literary lineage, captures the historical period of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the year 1967, when West Bengal and other parts of the country witnessed violent uprisings by peasants and tribal communities against feudal landlords. The story features characters like Dopdi Mejhen and her husband Dulna Majhi, who represent the rebellious tribals, as well as individuals like Arijit and Prabir, who symbolize the educated urban youth that joined the uprising to support the peasants in reclaiming their lands. The text delves into the complexities of the movement, exploring the fusion of academic knowledge with guerrilla warfare tactics, the collusion between state authorities and the military, the deceptions employed by the rebels, the betrayals within the insurgent ranks, and the brutal torture inflicted by the army and police on captured fugitives, particularly women. Mahasweta herself saw parallels between Draupadi and real-life figures like Archana Guha, a female Naxalite, and the infamous police officer Runu Guha Niyogi:

During the Naxalite movement in the seventies there was a notorious police officer who especially took delight in arresting Naxalite women and torturing them barbarously. One Naxalite woman became almost an invalid. Amnesty International... moved her to some other country. She was cured and she came back and filed a case against this police officer... he lost in the end... that way she avenged Draupadi. (Collu, 1998, pp. 146-147)

Draupadi serves as a contrasting story from that specific era, as well as from previous eras filled with comparable instances of social, caste, ethnic, and gender oppressions. Mahasweta effectively emerged as a modern realistic historian, as described by Hayden White in following lines:

history was less an end in itself than a preparation for amore perfect understanding and acceptance of the individual's responsibility in the fashioning of the common humanity of the future... promoting a more realistic awarenessof the

uniqueness of the present age', and, making 'clear in what respects [the presentsocial system] resembles and in what it differs from the social system thatpreceded it; and to determine what was gained by that upheaval. (White, 1966, p.133)

Her ethical position ultimately embraced the variety of interpretations instead of the strictness of facts, with the goal of questioning and resisting the dominant "epistemic violence" that silences marginalized voices.

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