

## MAHASVETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*: RESISTANCE WITHIN

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### Abstract

*Mahasveta Devi's Draupadi is a story of confrontation among sections of hierarchies of power, class and gender. The textual dynamics engage with cultural negotiations, with male defined world and dabble into history and myth. Draupadi, the title character of the story, has to undergo the suffering because of her subaltern status. This paper tries to analyze the story for its representation of subaltern being.*

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Dopdi, Mahasveta Devi, Post colonialism*

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**MAHASVETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*: RESISTANCE WITHIN**- **Kavita Patil**

The term “Subaltern” refers to an inferior rank in British military. In critical theory and post colonialism, it is used to define the sections of society which are politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. The term was introduced to Humanities by Antonio Gramsci, notably through his work on cultural hegemony, which identified the groups that are excluded from a society's established institutions and thus denied the means by which people have a voice in their society.<sup>1</sup> “Subaltern,” according to Spivak is not another fancy word for oppressed. She points out that in Gramsci's original usage, it signified “proletarian,” whose voice could not be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. In postcolonial terms the section of the society which has no or limited access to cultural imperialism is Subaltern. She makes it clear that the working class is oppressed not subaltern. Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” argues: “In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female even more deeply in shadow.”<sup>2</sup> And even if the subaltern subject attempts to speak, others do not have patience to listen to it. The communication process is incomplete since the message sent by the sender does not reach to the receiver.

In short Subaltern is an individual that is oppressed and has limited hegemonic power or accessibility to the notion of power. Through historical narrative the oppressed do not have access to regularly perceived normalcy and access to the state amenities. The oppressed can generate power to force state apparatus to ensure the revision of history. Revisionist history enables an oppressed person to feature in the rewritten history. The subaltern on the other hand lack recognition and cannot contribute to the revisionist history. The subaltern does not have access to the state apparatus to be involved in the revision of history and is not even aware of the discourse surrounding him or herself. The subaltern and oppressed are two separate notions. Not all the oppressed can be considered subaltern but all the subaltern are oppressed.

Mahashveta Devi's *Draupadi* is a story of confrontation among sections of hierarchies of power, class and gender. The textual dynamics engage with cultural negotiations, with male defined world and dabble into history and myth. Draupadi, the titular character of the story, has to undergo the suffering because of her subaltern status. The story "Draupadi" first appeared in the collection of Mahasveta Devi's short stories *Agnigarbha* ("Womb of Fire") in 1978. In the introduction to the collection Devi says that she wants change in the social system since according to her human beings are not meant only for party politics. Mahasveta Devi was a

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middle-class Bengali fiction writer, a social activist and a leftist intellectual. Draupadi is one of her most famous stories that has been reprinted and translated in several collections. It was translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She provides reasons of her translating this short story in the translator's foreword:

I translated this Bengali short story into English as much for the sake of its villain, Senanayak, as for its title character, Draupadi (or Dopdi). Because in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First- World scholar in search of the Third World, I shall speak of him first. On the level of the plot, Senanayak is the army officer who captures and degrades Draupadi. I will not go so far as to suggest that, in practice, the instruments of First-World life and investigation are complicit with such captures and such a degradation.' 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. He follows the necessities and contingencies of what he sees as his historical moment. There is a convenient colloquial name for that as well: pragmatism. Thus his emotions at Dopdi's capture are mixed: sorrow (theory) and joy (practice). Correspondingly, we grieve for our Third-World sisters; we grieve and rejoice that they must lose themselves and become as much like us as possible in order to be "free"; we congratulate ourselves on our specialists' knowledge of them.<sup>3</sup>

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak describes how White men tried to save Indian women from the Indian male members of their families those are their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. At that time the colonizers defined the colonized Indians as 'uncivilized and barbaric' and the white men intervened to save Indian women from their oppressors. The acts of savior ship of white men towards Third World women according to Spivak become the acts of violence. She claims so because the white male hegemony of theorizing conditions and existence of the Third World women is done from the position of privilege. These European theorists' ideas and acts of saving these women might not be what is needed to improve their conditions. Spivak is against the project of Europeans assuming the right to civilize the Third World. This situation thus becomes questionable as the European mission of civilization turns out to be more of denying others the possibility of speech than saving Third World women from Third World men.

The story can be read as an allegory to Draupadi from *Mahabharata*. In this story Dopdi is placed within contemporary historical contexts where her ancestry is treated to Champabhumi of Bengal and her present status is described to be that of an activist from the naxalite movement of the seventies, in the area of the northern part of West Bengal, a fugitive on the run from the police. Draupadi, the central character, belongs to the Santhal tribe of India and is given the name by her upper-caste mistress. It is the killing of this mistress' husband that sets going the events of the story. The tribal can't even pronounce the Sanskrit name 'Draupadi' correctly. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains in her rather lengthy translator's

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note, the Dalit tongues and dialects simply don't form those syllables, and she is called "Dopdi" instead. The story opens with the conversation between two cops about Draupadi and her husband. The reader is introduced to the two versions of her name: Dopdi (a tribalized form of Sanskrit name Draupadi and a proper name of ancient Draupadi) and Draupadi (one of the important characters of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*). In the story the regional police are after her since she is suspected of being a guerrilla Maoist. This short story represents the power dynamics between the dominant colonial morality, present in the form of army and police force, and the Subaltern elements. Spivak argues: "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."<sup>4</sup>

Dopdi, the central character of the story, can be compared with the ancient Draupadi, one of the most celebrated heroines of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Spivak argues:

On the level of the text, this elusive and fortuitous name does play a role. To speculate upon this role, we might consider the *Mahabharata* itself in its colonialist function in the interest of the so-called Aryan invaders of India. It is an accretive epic, where the "sacred" geography of an ancient battle is slowly expanded by succeeding generations of poets so that the secular geography of the expanding Aryan colony can present itself as identical with it and thus justify itself. The complexity of this vast and anonymous project makes it an incomparably more heterogeneous text than the *Ramayana*. Unlike the *Ramayana*, for example, the *Mahabharata* contains cases of various kinds of kinship structure and various styles of marriage. And in fact it is Draupadi who provides the only example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India. She is married to the five sons of the impotent Pandu.<sup>5</sup>

The story questions ancient Draupadi's "singularity" by placing Dopdi first in a comradesly, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. Dopdi, is a name given to a twenty-seven year old tribal woman, by her mistress. Dopdi is in the list of wanted persons who had killed the mistress' husband, Surja Sahu a land-owning money lender, because he refuses to share water with untouchables. A reward of two hundred rupees is announced for the person who would kill her. Mr. Senanayak, an army officer, manages to capture Dopdi. She is kept at the canvas-camp till the dinner time. Senanayak permits his men to do whatever they like to Dopdi. Her hands and legs are tied to four posts. She becomes unconscious. In the morning she is brought to the tent. On seeing Senanayk the dishonored Dopdi walks towards him to exhibit what has happened to her. In the story the men in uniform easily succeed in stripping Dopdi unlike Mahabharata in which Krishna saves her from being stripped publicly and it adds to his row of miracles. On the other hand the men in uniform rape her to punish for not abiding law. Mahasveta Devi writes in the story:

Draupadi Mejhén was apprehended at 6:53P.M. It took an hour to get her to camp. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8:57 Senanayak's dinner hour approached, and saying, "Make her. Do the needful," he

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disappeared. 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? Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's been made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven-then Draupadi had passed out.<sup>6</sup>

She chooses to be naked publicly and tears off her clothes into pieces when the men in uniform try to put on clothes on her body. Dopdi inverts the accepted codes of the epic Mahabharata by using her nakedness, torture and rape to dread the soldiers, the male dominance. The codes of shame and fear through sexual assault and nakedness confirm to the relations of power between dominant male and submissive female. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi ironically reverses this generally accepted codes through the situation where the dominant male, the violators do not know how to react to Dopdi's actions. The last scene of the story reads:

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, counter me-come on, counter me-? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.<sup>7</sup>

Her empowerment freezes Senanayak. The illiterate and low-born woman teaches the male officials a shocking lesson. They are unable to face the "Unarmed target". According to Spivak Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi, in fact more so because of her act of defiance. Spivak states:

There is nothing "historically implausible" about Dopdi's attitudes. When we first see her, she is thinking about washing her hair. She loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith toward him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their women's honor. (It should be recalled that this is thought in the context of American soldiers breeding bastards.) It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject," who, still using the language of sexual "honor," can derisively call herself "the object of your search," whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object-"an unarmed target."<sup>8</sup>

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Dopdi can be called a gendered subaltern. Since she belongs to the lowest of the low economic class, she is subjected to double exploitation. She suffers because of her subaltern status which can be further compounded by the grotesque workings of her caste. Dopdi, in the story is the oppressed and has no access to cultural imperialism but she resists the power. Covering herself up with clothes would have been the act of reaffirmation of the value system established by the patriarchal ideologies of woman's modesty. According to Spivak, Dopdi's inaction is a strong action against established norms. The construct of "sexual honour" of a woman is redefined by Dopdi when she comes out naked and confronts Senanayak.

The powerless tribal woman challenges the postcolonial state apparatus that exists in the form of Senanayak. Dopdi confronts the dominant male agency. The binary of victim and agent falls apart as Draupadi effectively separates violation from victimhood.

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