

## VECTORIZING THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*

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### ABSTRACT

Subaltern is a core concept in Postcolonial studies focusing on South Asia or Global South. The issues of domination and power, democracy and citizenship, resistance and transformation are effectively articulated by the literature of the subaltern. Through attributing a metaphorical and political status, Antonio Gramsci analysed 'subaltern' with a view to transform the subordinated social groups from the clutches of hegemonic domination. The works of the eminent Indian theoretician, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, forms as the methodology to theorize the subaltern as a female. In "Scattered Speculations of the Subaltern and the Popular", Spivak theorizes subaltern as a position without identity "where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action" (475). Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" clearly states that the identity and subjectivity of the subaltern is constructed by the imperialist ideologies and in this context of colonial production, the subaltern cannot speak, and "the subaltern as female is even more deeply deeper in the shadow" (287). Translated by Spivak, Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' (1997) poignantly encapsulates the pangs and sufferings of a Santhal tribal woman named Dopdi Mehjan from West Bengal. The paper highlights the resistance of Dopdi in dismantling the conventional structures of racial and gender discrimination amidst injustice, social oppression and violence. Dopdi subverts the physicality of her body from powerlessness into powerful resistance.

**Key words:** Subaltern, Post-colonial Feminism, Identity Politics, Resistance and Dominant groups.

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### INTRODUCTION

*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 merely believe in mere party politics.*

Mahasweta Devi's *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire)

The continuous expansion of postcolonialism made its own domains of interest with other fields of academic studies such as African American Literature, Literary Theory and criticism, anthropology and Cultural studies. The discussion of gendered subalternity oriented the field of subaltern studies towards feminism in general and postcolonial feminism in particular. In "The New Subaltern", Spivak claimed that subaltern is gendered and hence needs to be studied with the help of feminist theory. The Indian authors namely Swapna Das Gupta, Ramachandra Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Tanika Sarkar among others applied the term 'subaltern' in a broad sense to South Asian subalterns from colonial and postcolonial times. They highlighted different experiences of subalterns, their revolts and their acts of recovery. Now-a-days, "subaltern has become a euphemism for all brown beaten people suffering under the oppression of elite groups" (Baverly 1999).

The Indian American, Postcolonial feminist critic, Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity within new historical developments as brought by capitalistic politics of undermining

revolutionary voice and divisions of labour in a globalized world. Fundamental to Spivak's theory is the concept of subaltern, which she borrowed from the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Different theorists and scholars define it in different ways. Lexically the English word 'subaltern' came from the Latin word 'subalternus' which implies an under other. In that way, the word subaltern refers to the inferiority of someone or something. The Oxford English Dictionary defines subaltern as both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, a subaltern is "a lower rank British officer" while as an adjective, subaltern stands for lower rank people in all aspects. The word subaltern is conflated with synonymous terms including subordinated, down trodden, marginalized and oppressed.

The subaltern is a military term which refers to any group of inferior rank based on ethnicity, class and gender. Gramsci applied the term subalterns to the downtrodden Italians, specifically South Italian workers marginalized by the hegemonic politics of the Fascist party. Gramsci argued that all sorts of subaltern consciousness and insurgencies cannot liberate subalterns from the oppression of ruling classes; their only liberty lies in their permanent victory from an oppressive state (Smith, "Gramsci at the Margins"). By this Gramsci propounded the concept of subaltern autonomy but Spivak dismantles the concept by asserting that subalterns are always subalterns. There is **no** space for their elevation. Their unapproachability, inaccessibility, unreachability keeps them subalterns and that is why their voice disperses into the shadows.

The growth of Subaltern studies as a global critical movement or approach in historical research was initiated during 1970's and 80's. In *Reading Subaltern Studies*, Ludden states "subaltern studies became a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine and fortress for scholars ranging across various disciplines" (2). The objective of the movement was to liberalize the "suppressed voices by challenging authoritative voices" (Azad 65). This approach unveiled the thick layers of hegemony embodied at multiple levels (Prakash 1476). According to Spivak, subaltern studies was different from Marxist historiography because of its emphasis on "the bottom layers of society rather than just the implementation of Marxist capital logic alone" ("The New Subaltern" 324). However, being a Marxist Feminist deconstructionist, Spivak applied the strategy of deconstruction to unveil truth to recover marginal subjects against the grain of central discourses. In this regard she contributed an essay titled "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography".

Spivak criticized subaltern studies as an elite school of thought due to its ignorance of the issue of gendered subalternity. Her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" focusses on themes including re-presentation, insurgency and passiveness of gendered subalterns. Spivak posits herself as a Third World Woman and articulated the voice of the subaltern groups like women, tribal people and orient, who cannot speak or who are silent. In the essay, she exposes the irony that the subalterns have awakened to a consciousness of their own rights by making practical utterances against unjust domination and inequality. Spivak attempts to restore the presence of the women writers who have been submerged by their male peers. She investigates women's double colonization (Dalit/ Black Women).

Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy rewrote the fictional narratives of subalterns thus unfolding the class based, caste bound and gendered subalternity. Mahasweta Devi is one of the most widely translated Indian writer, who spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of West Bengal and the Southeast of Bihar as a political anthropologist, investigative journalist, winner of the prestigious Jnanpith and Magasay Awards for literature, is concerned with the plight of tribals especially tribal women living on the fringe. Giving voices to Bengali subaltern voices, Mahasweta Devi through her short stories namely 'Breast Givers', 'Dhowli', 'Drapadi' and novel Rudali goes against all sorts of hegemonic ideologies to voice subalterns and also talks about

sensitive issues in gendered subalternity. Herself concerned with the upliftment of the subaltern people, Mahasweta Devi has become conscious of the atrocities inflicted on the tribal people. According to Spivak “Mahasweta Devi is as unusual within the Bengali literary tradition as Foucault or Derrida is unusual in the philosophical or political mainstream in France” (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 46).

Like Indira Goswami, Mahasweta Devi portrayed women characters who are the victims of oppressive gender practices of the patriarchal tradition in Indian society. The confrontation of tribal women with bodily and psychological struggle, cruelty by local landlords and poverty in the postcolonial era surface in Mahasweta's writings. In 'Draupadi', the tribal girl subjected to brutal rape and inhuman torture is represented as subaltern who can really speak. It is clear from the story that the tribal women protest not solely with language but their tortured bodies become the site of resistance.

The peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal in 1967 has spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes including tribal cultivators. The coalition of peasant and intellectual staged protest against oppression of the landless peasantry by landlords and this in fact constitutes a “political spectrum”. Spivak finds in Senanayak, the army officer, who captures and degrades Draupadi, the closest approximation to the First world scholar in search of the Third World. The instruments of First world life and investigation are complicit with such captures and degradation. Mahasweta Devi presents Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete; more than an enemy as a participant in the production of an exploitative society. Spivak has called the theme of class deconstruction with reference to the young gentlemen revolutionaries in “Draupadi”. Senanayak remains fixed with his class origins and inhabit authoritative world.

The story opens with what appears to be an ironic counterpointing of different modes of official discourse through which the central character, a tribal woman, Dopdi Mehjen is named, constructed displaced and silenced. Draupadi is introduced to the reader between two versions of her name: Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name (Draupadi) or the tribalized form, Dopdi is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi. In the epic, within a patriarchal and patronymic context, Draupadi is exceptional, indeed singular in the sense of odd, unpaired and uncoupled. Her husbands are legitimately pluralized and it demonstrate male glory. Draupadi provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men, the efficient cause of the crucial battle. Mahasweta's story questions this “singularity” by placing Dopdi first in a monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi; in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of law. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.

Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text. Dopdi loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith towards him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their women's honour. The decision makers among the revolutionaries are realistically bourgeois young men and women who have begun the long process of undoing the opposition between theory and practice. It is Arjit's voice that gives Dopdi the courage to save not herself but her comrades. Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' displays two forms of resistance—first resistance is in the form of tribal insurgencies and the second is acted out by Dopdi an active worker of the Naxalbari movement who is hunted down and raped in a bid to subjugate insurgent groups. Dopdi's existence in the Jharkhani forest as a militant among strange men, bereft of the protection of her husband is transgressive. Draupadi, who is a tribal insurgent, gets captured during her outrageous tribal uprisings against the government. After her capture, she

is beguiled for giving information about her companions. Because of her dedication, she is subjected to third degree in police custody; till the government officer Senanayak gives orders to “Make her. Do the needful,” (34).

With the episode of sexual dishonour, she emerges as the most powerful subject- author describes her as a terrifying super object- “an unarmed target”. As a tribal, Dopdi is not romanticized by Mahasweta. Unlike the divine intervention to save epic Draupadi from dishonour and humiliation, Dopdi could not find any superhuman assistance to save her modesty. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in 'The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing' states “sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy's method of social control rather than pathology of sexual violence as such” (102). The subjugation resurrects the rebel woman in her and she emerges as the most eloquent voice against patriarchal and elitist domination:

There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed...what more can you do? Come on, counter me- come on, counter me...?... for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (*Breast Stories* 37).

The Dalit Women suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender. Deprived of independence and feudal-state nexus, anguished tribals join Naxalite group being headed by Arjit. Dopdi and Dulna Mehjen incur the ire of administration and become the target of Senanayak. Though portrayed as illiterate uneducated tribal woman, she leads the politicized life and is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of tribal people. The way of protest Dopdi takes is powerful and innovative. An ordinary tribal woman has created stir among police and military authorities. She does not howl or behave like a helpless victim. Her naked body symbolizes the power of the marginalized and Senanayak feels absolutely powerless and shaken when she presents her mutilated body as “the object of your search” (196).

Dopdi stresses on the materiality of what women are for men; literally a target on which they can exercise their power. Spivak says Dopdi is “a part of the undoing of the opposites – the intellectual rural internationalist tribalist – that is the unwavering constitution of the underground, and the wrong side of the law (108). She is the aberration to Senanayak who remains fixed within his class. Dopdi acquires a new self- definition and becomes the active maker of her own meaning. She refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as a subject and emphasizes the truth of her own presence. We see in Draupadi a woman who is vulnerable to injustice but resist the brunt of social oppression and violence with indomitable courage and even try to deconstruct the age-old structures of racial and gender discrimination.

## CONCLUSION

Dopdi has become successful in setting up a new paradigm against the hegemonic forces persecuting the marginalized. She is the representative of tribal women who can dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy. The re- presentation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts: the subaltern woman can be represented in imaginative writing and she can be represented as an agent. Mahasweta's writings essentialize the aesthetics of literature as a weapon against oppression and inscribe the courage and resilience of the victim protagonist. To Spivak, Devi articulates post coloniality in a space of difference.

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