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SUBVERTING HEGEMONIC PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSES: A STUDY OF MAHASWETA
DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, the activist-writer, challenges the grand narratives of the nation and presents counter-narratives that challenges the official/state position of silence and engineered exclusion. Her short story, *Draupadi*, is a document of violence on and resistance by gendered subaltern, Dopdi, who challenges the might of callous post-colonial state (embodied in the figure of Senanayak) through her indomitable courage and will power. She uses her vulnerability as a counter-offensive against both the state and the hegemonic social structures and derides at their incapacity to face the 'unarmed target'. Conquering her pain and humiliation she emerges as the most powerful 'subject'. The present paper attempts to analyze Devi's *Draupadi* as a meta-narrative that subverts hegemonic patriarchal discourses.

Key words: subaltern, hegemony, gender, patriarchy.

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..I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off
the face of India which is projected by the government, to expose
its naked brutality.. (Devi, x)

The much acclaimed works of Bengali writer cum activist, Mahasweta Devi, are the sites of dissent, resistance and protest by the gendered subalterns against the hegemonic dominations of patriarchy and the establishment. Her writings at once both debunk and contravene the gender and cultural norms of the society. Fuelling political activism at the grass-root level, she foregrounds the exploitative social system by highlighting the injustices done to the tribals like Santhals, Lodhas, Mundas and Shabars, who are called upon to work for the country and the state but who are in turn never taken care off. Her women characters like Draupadi, Shanichari, Jashoda and Dhoulis are rebels who refuse to be dis-possessed, dis-empowered and displaced despite of their endless sufferings at the hands of the social and political masters. Devi, the crusader of the rights of Dalit, evocatively presents 'politics of domination, caste oppression, material violence, inhuman torture, repressive disclosure, overarching hegemony, historical marginalization and engineered exclusion; and liberates conventional epistemological blind'.(Nair 480) The present paper attempts to analyze Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* as a meta-narrative that subverts hegemonic patriarchal discourses by presenting counter-narrative that challenges official stand of silence and exclusion of tribals and more so the gendered subaltern.

Draupadi, published in Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories titled *Agnigarbh* (1978) and translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in her collection titled *Breast Stories* (2010), is an extraordinary and rare document of violence on and resistance by a poor, illiterate tribal woman who, in her ultimate denial to clothe herself, not only exposes the ugly and horrifying face of political repressive forces including government, bureaucrats, feudal masters and the state sponsored delinquents, but also challenges the might of callous post-colonial state embodied in the figure of Senanayak. The play documents the economic, political, social and sexual oppression of the dalit women in tribal areas who suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender. It is about the 1967 peasant rebellion in the naxalbari area of West Bengal by the landless peasants and the itinerant farm workers against the unofficial state-feudal nexus. The rage of the suffering tribals is provoked by SurjaSahu, the feudal kingpin, who refuses to share with the tribals – the proverbial others – the 'unlimited' water of the two tube wells which have been dug up in connivance with and approval of the state forces. Anguished tribals, disillusioned with twenty years' fake independence and frustrated with feudal-state nexus, join the naxalite group being headed by Arijit and perpetrate revenge-killing on SurjaSahu and his sons. In order to crack down the rebellion and respond to the naxalite revenge-killing the government forces launch 'Operation Jharkhani', initially under the charge of Arjan Singh and later under Senanayak. The mission is meant to destroy the rebellious sections, majorly tribals. During one of the operations, three villages are cordoned off and the innocent villagers are gunned down. During the infamous crack-down, Dopdi and her husband, Dulna, lie flat on the ground, faking dead. They later flee the village to lead the life of fugitives. The couple maneuvers to escape the brutal forces by using the guerilla warfare – considered as the most detestable and abhorring style of fighting with primitive weapons such as hatchets and scythes, bows and arrows. Dedicating themselves absolutely to the cause of the naxalite movement the couple works in different guises at different villages in the Jharkhani belt foregoing their dreams of a family and stable life for the larger goal of the movement which is to achieve social utopia and economic freedom. Proudly announcing themselves as soldiers, the couple –Dulna and Dopdi Majhen – effectively describes all details about their targets and also informs their comrades about the movement of the army. The victimization of such a couple thus highlights the predicament of the tribals who are entangled between the pulls of '...subsistence living and the appropriatory logic of feudalistic modernist patriarchal state and its allied system'.(Dwivedi 243)

Operation Jharkhani gains momentum under the leadership of Senanayak, 'a specialist in combat and extreme left politics'. He is a seasoned military strategist with mastery over 'theories' on how to defeat the enemy by learning their language, using tribal informants and 'kountering' techniques:

In order to destroy the enemy, become one. Thus he understood them by (theoretically) becoming one of them. He hopes to write on all this in the future. He has also decided that in his written work he will demolish the gentlemen and highlight the message of the harvest workers. (Devi 394)

Anup Beniwal has rightly pointed towards Senanayak's 'doublethink' and contradictions inherent in personality as the latter identifies with the tribals in theory but destroys them in practice. 'He is triumphant that he could anticipate Dopdi's move and apprehend her. But he is regretful as Dopdi was about to be destroyed since in theory he supported her struggle'.(Beniwal 136) Senanayak, with the help of informant Dukhram Gharai, is able to kill Dopdi's husband, Dulna, and knowing too well that she loved her husband more than her blood, uses the dead body as a bait to trap her. But Dopdi, with 'pure and unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi', is a fearless fighter like her forefathers and remains faithful to the codes of conduct of her tribe that directs 'crow would eat crow's flesh before a Santhal would betray Santhal'.(Devi 399) Unfortunately it is her loyalties and faithfulness to the codes that enable Senanayak to predict her moves and ultimately apprehend her. But Dopdi is no common militant, according to the dossier she is the 'most notorious female' and on being 'apprehended' she fulfills her duty by giving signal to her comrades by ululating at highest pitch possible. In an attempt to subjugate her mind, body and soul, Dopdi is raped repeatedly by a number of men as she loses consciousness time and time again during her ordeal.

Dopdi, the 'tribalized reincarnation of mythical Draupadi', does not receive any divine intervention while undergoing the worst form of violence as she is tied up and brutally gang raped several times.(Nair 491)

Devi had deliberate design behind choosing the name 'Dopdi' for her heroine as is evident in the fact that the text opens with the discussion about her name between the two medallion uniforms, 'What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name?' (Devi 392) Devi's portrayal of Dopdi both deconstructs and reconstructs the figure of mythical Draupadi. While the mythical Draupadi is saved by the divine intervention of Lord Krishna, Dopdi is gang raped by the custodians of law and order – the men in uniform. Secondly, while Mahabharata's Draupadi pleads the god to save her dignity, Devi's Dopdi does nothing of the sort. On the contrary, Dopdi refuses to be clothed again. She emerges like phoenix from the ashes of lust and lasciviousness. She is beyond shame that accompanies the act of disrobing and rape. Unlike her mythical counterpart, Dopdi transcends the sense of bodily shame and in a moment which is apocalyptic she becomes, in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'a terrifying super object'. (Spivak 184)

Where do you want me to go? ...Draupadi fixes her eyes on the tent. Says, come I'll go...Draupadi stands up. She pours the water on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. (Devi 401-402)

Senanayak is taken a back and is bewildered at the sight of Dopdi, 'Naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high'. (Devi, 402) She comes closer to the seasoned military expert, laughs and exclaims, 'The object of your search, Dopdi Majhen. You asked them to make me up. Don't you want to see how they made me?' (Devi, 402) Dopdi refuses to clothe herself and challenging the perpetrators' masculinity derides,

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (Devi 402)

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan asserts, 'It is simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy'. (Sunder, pg 352) Foucault has also opined that assertion of power itself creates the condition responsible for resistance. The power and authority of the postcolonial state, embodied in the figure of Senanayak, is challenged thus by Dopdi,

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. (Devi 402)

She topples the male discourse of power upside down by mutating it into a weapon to confront her tormenters. As Spivak observes, Dopdi 'acts in not acting', and disappoints her oppressor by overturning his plan to subjugate her mind, body and soul. (Spivak 195) In declining to accept her 'dishonour', Dopdi declines to endorse the 'manhood' of the patriarchal agency yearning to cage her sexuality and political freedom. She, at once, subverts the male construct that commensurates feminine honour with the inviolate female body. (Nair 178)

Through the compelling interplay of politics and history, Devi exposes the irony of the patriarchal hegemonistic societies that eulogize the idea of protecting a woman's honour at all cost but given a chance, violates her without having any qualm. Dopdi, the central character, is representative of millions of tribal women who are oppressed, marginalized and victimized by the agents of politics.

Devi plays the role of, what Anup Beniwal indicates, 'positive interventionist' by bringing to the fore the struggle for survival of the tribals. According to him, Devi foregrounds the tussle between the landless peasants and the establishment, while problematizing the state's self image of being a secular, democratic republic as imagined by newly neo-colonial inheritors of power. Subverting the pretensions of welfare nationalism, Devi's work addresses the chasm between Indian feminism and dalit activism as neither of them have addressed the concerns of the dalit and tribal woman who is placed at the locus of multiple victimhood. (Beniwal 46-65) This work of Devi is a meta-narrative that seizes the piece of life of Dopdi standing at the cross-section of modern development state and circumscribed subaltern existence. She portrays how mainstream hegemonic power structure of patriarchal nation state protects itself through cruel and vicious 'othering' of those on the margins.

A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him...I desire a transformation of the present social system. After thirty one years of independence, I find myself still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writings...Hence I go on writing to the best of my ability about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame.

(Devi viii-ix)

Demographically accounting for around 8.2% of the total population of India, tribals have been mercilessly marginalized by the mainstream discourse of development. Devi's work, in turn, 'produces a kind of deconstructive, counter-historical and counter-hegemonic discourse which aims to center the subaltern'. (Rathod 51)

Bringing to the fore the plight of tribals who have been rendered invisible in the nationalist discourse, as well as the gendered subaltern who is pushed to the ultimate margin, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* presents a dystopian critical perspective of the tribal world dominated by imperialism and patriarchy. Shaking the reader out of utopian stupor, the story acquaints him with pathetic condition of the tribal women who are constantly under the fear of victimization. But this is not to indicate that Devi's *Dopdi* is meek submissive self to be pitied for her plight, instead, she emerges as empowered for she challenges her assailants even when unarmed, subverting the gaze in a manner that her tormenters feel both threatened and humiliated. The story, calling re-examination of our reading of history, foregrounds the position of tribal communities who lose their traditional habitats and are compelled to join the insurgent groups or become a part of disordered laboring classes of the country. By giving the title '*Draupadi*' Devi at once conjugate myth, history and contemporary reality in excursive structures that disrupt hegemonic frameworks. Her protagonist uses her vulnerability as a counter-offensive against both the state and the hegemonic social structures and derides at their incapacity to face the 'unarmed target'. Conquering her pain and humiliation she emerges as the most powerful 'subject'. Her tale presents the bitter realities of the revolutionary movements of the tribals in an unabated manner and highlights the irony that in twenty first century India dalit women still have to fight the unjust world order for bare survival.

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