

# Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi": Re-exploration of a rebel with subaltern consciousness

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

A retrospective glance on Indian cultural heritage ranging from primitive era to present day divulges before us the miscellaneous roles enacted by the women of different socio-political ethos; sometimes we encounter them as victim of crude male-biased society and again we envisage them as empowered entity who stand against male-chauvinists retaining preoccupation with characteristic dynamicity. The vicissitudes of womanhood of various temporal setting has always been well recorded in contemporary literary outcomes, especially by the craftsmanship of the exponent feminist authors. Now this paper focuses on Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" that concerns the resurgence of a tribal girl Dopadi. It contains the story of resurrection of epical Draupadi who has been vividly contextualized and replaced by a Santhal woman, Dopadi Mehjen, a bold activist of Naxalite Movement of the seventies. The imperial Draupadi of Kuru Dynasty undergoes a thorough transformation in Devi's dexterous disposal. Here she has been demythicised as a rebellious figure who asserts crusade against brutality of male usurper. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to critique Devi's endeavour to establish the notion of woman empowerment within male hegemonic power structure from post-colonial subaltern perspective.

## **Mahasweta Devi's penetrative vision in subaltern issues:**

Devi's uniqueness in the domain of literary projection lies in her myth-making power by dint of which she speaks for the marginalized 'other' of the society. As an active social worker she engages herself to produce literature with a view to pertaining justice for those who are deprived of attaining status quo of mainstream. Her documentation with the voice of the neglected marginals irrespective of class, caste, gender, race, community and culture indicates her penetrative insight in subaltern issues. Her sole aim was to fight for the suppression of the indigenous people who are marked as 'subaltern' or the people of the fourth world. In his famous article "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism" Gyan Prakash enunciated that the term 'subaltern' derived from Antonio Gramsci's writing "was used to signify the centrality of dominant/ dominated relationships in history" (1477). Mahasweta's study with the lives of ordinary tribal people won international acclaim

through Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's assiduous translation. Devi's chief concern with the subjugation of the dalit woman who is doubly colonized came into limelight by Spivak in her essays as an agenda of feminist study of decolonizing culture. This thematic issue has been finely recapitulated in Devi's short story "Draupadi" where Vyasa's Draupadi is reincarnated in a tribal Santhal 'Dopadi'. This is what Himani Banerjee views as "the issue of women's status in India with respect to the issue of their personhood, their social subjectivity and agency" (911) in her "Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies' 'Resolution of the Women's Question' " (2000).

### **Projection of Draupadi as a Subaltern rebel:**

Quite in accordance with the 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-political scenario of Bengal Devi successfully attempted to drag Draupadi of mythology from her royal palace to the rural Adivasi backdrop. Devi's Dopadi Mehjen and her husband Dulna Majhi and their other Naxal co-mates ventured jointly to kill the landlord Surja Sahu. The Senanayak led other army officers to slay Dulna and entrap Dopadi to quench their grudge sadistic desire. This story included in the collection of short fiction "Breast Stories" reached the summit of excellence in the form of powerful translation done by Spivak who states about the Santhal that "they are... not to be confused with the so-called untouchables, who, unlike the tribal, are Hindu, though probably of remote 'non-Aryan' origin." This story unravels before the reader a parallel contour of utmost state violence with threatening aggression and daring approach of the protagonist Dopadi who enables herself to throw challenge towards the act of dehumanization recovering from grief-stricken shameful state.

One aspect of dehumanization gets vivified through language. Dopadi and Dulna are condemned for speaking in 'a savage tongue' which the state is reluctant to comprehend. The language of the 'other' seems unintelligible to the local officers who boasts in their sophisticated and polished language. In actual sense, the language spoken by the tribe cannot be decoded by the 'tribal specialist type' from Calcutta; it is for their incapability as well as unwillingness to amalgamate themselves with the tribal culture. Thus, the 'black-skinned bodies' (these tribal people are reduced to mere bodies) are kept aside from mainstream stories, sentiments and histories. They are rather degraded as objects for study of the so-called academicians.

The heinous part of humiliation against which Dopadi reacted fierce fully entails the corporeal torture done on her. Different parts of her body are exposed as testimonial of violent exploitation. Subjected to a gang rape, a 'tear trickles out of the corner of her eye'. Devi portrays Dopadi's body as the horrific site having lots of wounds inflicted by the ravishers: 'her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn', 'her vagina is bleeding', and 'thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood'. When the officer asked Draupadi to wear clothes after completion of rape, she disinclines to rob herself. Refusing to be shamed she proceeds defiantly in blooded nakedness in front of the officer. Senanayak was unable to decipher the meaning of her crack-jawed laughter bursting forth from her wounded lips which is a sign of abhorrence. Here her radical posture forces the Senanayak to be submissive- too afraid to utter a word. For the first time, his role is averted. Before this uncivilized, illiterate and uncultured lady who is disrobed and bruised this brute seems to be

speechless. Here he lacks the fluency of modern language. Using the weapon of vehement undressed gesture this lady of lower community enables herself to make the Senanayak 'afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.' Malini Bhattacharya's observation about Devi deserves mentioning in this context. She remarked that " she (Devi) lapses sometimes into one dimensional melodrama as in "Draupadi", where a tribal girl after being sexually tortured by the police makes a weapon of her own nakedness." (1004). Herein lies the eloquence of her language in the midst of silence and Devi's accomplishment in painting the picture of a rebel who is doubly oppressed- one for belonging to tribal community and another for being a part of weaker sex of male- dominated society.

### **Conclusion:**

The Draupadi of legends and the Dopadi of Devi's story – both the female entities fall prey to the politically charged environment that makes them ostracized . But one stands in sharp contrast to other. Whereas the former prays for a saviour to get rid of disrobed helplessness, the latter is powerful enough to reject her garments emerging out of feminine shyness to confront the brutes. So, Devi's Dopadi figures as a rebellious subaltern retaining the potentiality of resistance against hostility of male domination. Devi's genius is highly praised for attaining supremacy in chalking the character of a rebel . It is, undoubtedly, quite in accordance with Devi's fervent zeal as an activist and writer.

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