

## Exploitation and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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### **Abstract:**

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is regarded as the voice of the subalterns. She gave voice to the voiceless by revealing different forms of subjugation inherent in Indian society. Her writings deal with the exploitation and oppression of the underprivileged especially tribal and tribal women. Her writings explore the patterns of oppression on the basis of class, caste and gender. She presents the lives of the oppressed people amidst hardship and reveals their strength and vitality to resist any form of subjugation. In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight Devi's story "Draupadi" that delineates the exploitation of tribal and tribal women in all possible ways.

**Keywords: Gender, Exploitation, Subjugation, Resistance.**

An Indian (Bengali) progressive novelist, short story writer, playwright, journalist and social activist, Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is regarded as the voice of the subalterns. She gave voice to the voiceless by revealing different forms of subjugation inherent in Indian society. Her writings deal with the exploitation and oppression of the underprivileged especially tribals and tribal women and review the patterns of tyranny on the basis of class, caste and gender. She does not present a lofty image of the exploited rather explores their lives amidst hardship and exhibit their strength and vitality to resist any form of subjugation. Her story "Draupadi" is such an example that delineates the exploitation of tribals and tribal women in all possible ways.

Published in the collection of stories entitled *Breast Stories* (2010), "'Draupadi' first appeared in *Agnigarbha* ('Womb of Fire'), a collection of loosely connected, short political narratives" (Draupadi: Translator's Preface 4). Originally written in Bengali and afterward translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this story is set against the political chaos like Naxalite Movement (1967-71) and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). During the

Naxalite Movement and the Bangladesh Liberation conflict both men and women were tormented but women are the worst victim as they are mentally, psychologically, physically and sexually abused. The whole story is divided into three parts. Sanatan Bhowal states: "The story is in three parts: if the first part is taken for a thesis, the second part is an extension of the thesis with the change in emphases, while the third part begins and continues upto the point of the 'event' as a further extension of the thesis, only to confront the strongest possible antithesis" (118).

The story revolves around the periodic conflicts between landlords supported by administration and the tribals. During these conflicts, the landowners and moneylenders face violent opposition from the tribals and some of them were even killed. The famous Operation Bakuli forms the background of this story:

In 1971, in the famous *Operation Bakuli*, when three villages were *cordoned off* and *machine gunned*, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying *upper-caste* wells and tubewells during the *drought*, not *surrendering* those three young men to the police. In all this they were the chief instigators. In the morning, at the time of the body count, the couple could not be found. (17)

The couple referred in the above quote is Dopdi Majhen and her husband Dulna Majhi. They are "ululating and dancing" couple. Dopdi Mehjen is a young Santhal Tribe woman of twenty-seven. She along with her husband, Dulna Majhi, and their comrades, is responsible for the death of Surja Sahu, the landlord in Bakuli. This leads heavy firing on the villagers by Special Forces in retaliation for the killing of Surja Sahu. The next morning the bodies of Dopdi and Dulna are missing from the corpses that cause great anxiety to Captain Arjan Singh. Now they are in the list of most wanted couple. A thorough search of the whole area by the Special Force is made but the couple could not be detected. This failure of Captain Arjan Singh in arresting the couple affects his health adversely. It affects so badly that he develops an irrational

dread of black-skinned people that whenever he saw a black person in a ball-bag, he swooned, saying 'they're killing me', and drank and passed a lot of water. Neither uniform nor Scriptures could relieve that depression. At long last, under the shadow of a *premature* and *forced retirement*, it was possible to present him at the desk of Mr Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics. (18)

It is in this environment that Senanayak takes charge. Interestingly the conflict between the Special Force and the most wanted couple is not a confronting combat rather like hide and seek game. The couple wants to delay their arrest as far as possible while the force is determined to arrest them as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we come to know that the couple went underground in a *Neanderthal* darkness in Jharkhani belt. The newly charged Senanayak deploys a Special Force to make a close search of the entire Jharkhani forest area. He seeks help from local people and collects information and eventually succeeds in getting Dulna shot dead:

Finally the impenetrable forest of Jharkhani is surrounded by real soldiers, the *army* enters and splits the battlefield. Soldiers in hiding guard the false and springs that are the only source of drinking water; they are still guarding, still looking. On one such search, army informant Dukhiram Gharari saw a young Santhal man lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. The soldiers shot him as he lay. As the .303 threw him off spread-eagled and brought a bloody foam to his mouth, he roared ‘Ma-ho’ and then he went limp. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Majhi. (20)

Senanayak is happy to shot Dulna dead. The soldiers leave Dulna’s corpse and climb the trees. They are waiting that someone will come to claim the corpse. Devi remarks:

This is the hunter’s way, not the soldier’s. But Senanayak knows that these brutes cannot be dispatched by the approved method. So he asks his men to draw the prey with a corpse as bait. All will come clear, he says. . . . The soldiers get going at his command. But no one comes to claim Dulna’s corpse. (21).

The soldiers are marching in the jungle and accidentally Dukhiram is killed “before he can claim the reward for Dulna’s capture” (21). Dukhiram is an informant to the Special Force concerning the whereabouts of Dulna and Dopdi. Senanyak’s “failure to bait Draupadi with her husband’s corpse remains a thorn in his flesh. And yet, there is no challenge in the dominant discourse of state power; there is no change in the policy of ‘apprehension and elimination’” (Bhowal 119). Dopdi is still wanted by the army officers:

Thus the search for Dopdi continues. In the forest *belt* of Jharkhani, the *Operation* continues–will continue. It is a carbuncle on the government’s backside. Not to be cured by the tested ointment, not to burst with the appropriate herb. In the first phase the fugitives, ignorant of the forest’s *topography*, are caught easily, and by

the law of confrontation they are shot at taxpayer's expense. By the law of confrontation, their eyeballs, intestines, stomachs, hearts, genitals, and so on become the food of fox, vulture, hyena, wildcat, ant and worm, and the untouchables go off happily to sell their bare skeletons. (21-22)

As far as Dopdi is concerned, in the very beginning of the story two police officers are discussing her name which is confusing to one officer because it is not part of a certified list of names. Thus, her very name is problematic in so far as her identity is concerned:

FIRST MEDALLION. 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 MEDALLION. Draupadi Mejhen. Born the year her mother threshed rice at Surja Sahu (killed)'s at Bakuli. Surja Sahu's wife gave her the name. (16)

Here the remark made by Spivak is worth mentioning:

Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and 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. She is on a list of wanted persons, yet her name is not on the list of appropriate names for tribal women. (8)

The army officers are determined to arrest Dopdi. That is why Jharkhani area is under surveillance by the army officers. The second part of the story establishes this aspect in detail. On her way, Dopdi hears someone calling her name nonetheless she does not respond. She does not even turn back. She anticipates perhaps army officers are pursuing her: "When they [army officers] *kounter* you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound" (25). She was moving forward predicting her troubled future and meanwhile again she heard someone calling her name. She did not respond. She wonders her familiar name in this area is Upi Mejhen then who may be calling her with her name Dopdi. This creates a sense of suspicion in her mind:

Spines of suspicion are always furred in her mind. Hearing 'Dopdi' they stiffen like a hedgehog's. Walking, she *unrolls the film* of known faces in her mind. Who? No Shomra, Shomra is on the turn. Shomai and Budhna are also on the run, for other

reasons. Not Golok, he is in Bakuli. Is it someone from Bakuli? After Bakuli, her and Dulna's names were Upi Mejhen, Matang Majhi. Here no one but Mushai and his wife knows their real names. Among the young gentlemen, not all of the previous *batches* knew. (25-26)

She doubts that perhaps someone has revealed her identity. Despite this she does not care and moves ahead. The pursuer follows her repeatedly calling her name. Bhowal makes a crucial observation:

A name marks an individual; Draupadi consciously dissociates herself from it. The army knows Draupadi as a notorious rebel; her responding to that name in any way could endanger her. . . . The pursuer knows the pursued and perhaps knows why she will not respond. All he wants to do is to lead her up to the point where Senanayak is waiting with his team. (119)

She is unaware with the fact that she has already been betrayed by her two former fellow comrades – Shomai and Budhna – as it is evident later in the story. These two comrades have been purchased by Senanayak and they have revealed the whole secret related to Dopdi. Now they are calling her name not to get response: “The call is not meant to elicit any verbal or gestural response from her, it is only to get Draupadi to keep walking along a set path. Senanayak wants to keep her busy speculating the pursuer's identity and the uncertainty of it, he knows, will make her incapable of improvising any new strategies of escape” (Bhowal 120). Dopdi was in a very complex situation. However, she moves ahead without looking back. She is reminded of Operation Bakuli and the killing of Surja Sahu:

Surja Sahu's house was surrounded at night. Surja Sahu had brought out his gun. Surja was tied up with cow rope. His whitish eyeballs turned and turned, he was incontinent again and again. Dulna had said, I'll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay that debt.

Dopdi had said, His mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll put out his eyes. (26-27)

Obviously, Surja Sahu has exploited these tribals no end. The anger of these tribals ascends and eventually they decide to finish their exploiter thinking this will end their trouble. However, this generated further trouble in their life. The whole area was surrounded by army officers.

Anyhow Dulna and Dopdi had escaped to Jharkhani belt as mentioned above. Dopdi keeps walking with these thoughts and her pursuer keeps calling her name. Dopdi thinks that “by not turning her face her enemies will think she is not Draupadi, while her friends will consider it natural for her not to respond. But what Draupadi does not know is that all her knowledge is already known to her enemy. The evacuation of all her knowledge by the enemy—by possessing it through knowing—leaves her empty . . .” (Bhowal 120). She keeps moving and now she realizes she been deceived by Shomai and Budhna. Despite being males, they have disgraced their community: “Shomai and Budhna are half breeds. The fruits of war. Contributions to Radhabhumi by the American soldiers stationed at Shiandange. Otherwise crow would eat crow’s flesh before Santhal would betray Santhal” (28). However, she is determined and swears not to reveal any secret: “I swear by my life. By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told” (28).

Dopdi is reminded of the vital information she has to convey to her fellow activists in the camp and with this very thought she moves ahead. However, soon she realizes that her life is in great risk and there is no way to escape as her follower is her enemy. She determines to kill him: “I won’t go in the forest, I won’t lose him that way. I won’t outrun him. You fucking jackal of a cop, deadly afraid of death, you can’t run around in the forest. I’d run you out of breath, throw you in a ditch, and finish you off” (29). Soon she realizes it is too late and her body is weak enough to face them. Ultimately, she is “apprehended” nevertheless she faithfully alarms her comrades hidden in the forest of her arrest: “Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards 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” (31).

Thus, the long wanted Dopdi is apprehended with the tactics of Senanayak. She is cross questioned nonetheless she remains firm and adamant. She does not speak. Then Senanayak instructs the soldiers to “Make her. *Do the needful*” (31). Draupadi is tormented, abused and raped throughout night to extract information about her comrades. In the morning she realizes that her vagina is bleeding. She asks herself as how many came to make her? The insensitive behaviour of the army officers changes Draupadi completely and hereafter she does not behave like a helpless victim rather she “‘unmakes’ her making and thus reverses the subject-object equation and emerges as the most powerful subject” (Rekha 155). Strange enough to note that the same officer, who abused her body, insists that she should be dressed up. However, her behaviour is completely

changed and incomprehensible. Although her behaviour appears incomprehensible but in fact it is quite logical. In actuality it is the behaviour of army officers which is incompressible. She tears off her clothes with her teeth and

Seeing such strange behaviour, the guards says, She's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior. . . . Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sun light with her head high. The nervous guard trail behind. (32)

Dopdi goes and “stands before him [Senanayak], naked. Thigh and public hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds” (33). The officer is taken aback by her defiance as she stands before him “with her hand on her hip”. She laughs and asks the Senanayak that the object of his search is standing before him. Her laughter is also a means of resistance. What he will do now with his object of search? She reminds him that he has asked them “to make [her] up, don't [he] want to see how they made [her]?” (33) And that is why she came stark naked: “Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand” (33). Coming closer to him, she remarks:

What is 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 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, *kounter me—come one, kounter me—?*” (33).

Her questioning Senanayak whether he is a man poses questions like his masculinity, his humanity, and his ethical obligations. By the end of the story she stands before the army officers with her naked body that was mangled and tormented and abused. This is used as a weapon to resist. Senanayak feels totally helpless and stunned. Dopdi seems to be a woman of strong mind and determination. She does not care for the embarrassment linked with rape and sexual abuse. She “pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid” (33).

It is evident that through the portrayal of Dopdi, Devi is trying to shift of the epic princess Draupadi to the tribal rebel Dopdi. Devi is presenting Dopdi not as a victim rather a bold lady able to present voices to the voiceless otherwise suppressed. Dopdi raises her voice against extreme

agony and atrocities inflicted on the tribals. Her way of dissent is quite different that makes this story an extremely shocking, powerful and pioneering narrative. She seems to be an ordinary tribal woman but in reality, she has created stir among army officers who are tirelessly hunting for her. Though Dopdi has been physically abused, she refuses to be emotionally wounded and presents a strong woman who challenges the established social norms from helpless victim to powerful discourse of resistance.

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