



Mahasweta Devi's “Draupadi”: A Feminist Critique

Meena Kumari Tiwari

Research Scholar

School of Studies in English

Vikram University, Ujjain

Prof.(Dr.) Anjana Pandey

Professor

School of Studies in English

Vikram University, Ujjain

Abstract

This research paper provides a comprehensive feminist critique of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi*, which centers on the protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen—a tribal woman and revolutionary who resists the systemic oppression of marginalized communities in India. Devi's narrative subverts traditional gender roles and challenges the pervasive patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence against women, especially those from oppressed communities. This paper examines the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class in Devi's work and discusses how the story reconfigures notions of female resistance and agency.

Keyword: Draupadi, *Mahabharata*

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Indian author and social activist, has consistently spotlighted the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly women, through her literary works. In *Draupadi*, one of her most powerful short stories, Devi presents a raw narrative that critiques the patriarchal oppression of women, especially those from tribal and lower-caste backgrounds. The story revolves around Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal insurgent, whose tale of resistance and survival offers a radical reimagining of female agency in the context of Indian society. The story is about the tribal uprising against wealthy landlords. The story of *Draupadi* offers a profound exploration of the lives and struggles of the peasants from Naxalbari, a region in West Bengal, who were engaged in a significant uprising against oppressive landlords.

At the heart of this narrative is Draupadi Mejhen, affectionately known as Dopdi, a fiercely resilient tribal woman who plays a central role in the Naxalite movement. The Naxalites, a radical group of communist insurgents, are dedicated to overthrowing the existing government and championing the rights of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Dopdi, alongside her husband Dulna, is deeply entrenched in this armed struggle against systemic injustice. Their involvement has made them targets of intense pursuit by the authorities, who seek to suppress the revolutionary activities of the Naxalites. Through Dopdi's indomitable spirit and the couple's defiant resistance, the story highlights the harsh realities and profound struggles faced by those fighting for equity and justice in a tumultuous socio-political landscape.

Draupadi is a notable Bengali short story written by the acclaimed author Mahasweta Devi. Originally published in 1978 as part of her influential collection **Agnigarbha**, this powerful narrative was later translated into English by the renowned literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The translation appeared in Spivak's collection titled **Breast Stories**, which brought Devi's compelling work to a wider international audience. Through Spivak's translation, the story of Draupadi, which delves into themes of identity, resistance, and social injustice, has gained recognition beyond its original linguistic and cultural context, highlighting the universal relevance of Devi's poignant storytelling.

As Tanika Sarkar notes in *The Many Faces of Women in India: A Critical Study*, "the notion of female honor is intricately tied to the control of women's bodies within a patriarchal framework" (Sarkar, 2018, p. 154). According to Sarkar, this societal expectation imposes rigid norms of modesty on women, which are instrumental in perpetuating their subjugation and reinforcing traditional gender roles. These norms are not merely social expectations but serve as mechanisms for maintaining patriarchal dominance by controlling and surveilling women's bodies, thereby restricting their autonomy and freedom. Devi's narrative in *Draupadi* powerfully challenges this entrenched system by introducing a protagonist who consciously rejects these imposed norms.

Dopdi Mejhen's act of defiance is vividly illustrated through her refusal to cover her naked body after being subjected to brutal violence. This refusal is not a mere act of personal rebellion but a profound and symbolic rejection of the patriarchal control that seeks to dictate and regulate women's bodies. By confronting and subverting these traditional expectations, Devi's story amplifies the resistance against the systemic oppression that underpins patriarchal societies. Dopdi's bare body thus becomes a potent symbol of resistance, reclaiming her autonomy and challenging the very structures that attempt to subjugate her. In this way, Devi not only critiques but actively dismantles the patriarchal narratives that seek to confine and control women, offering a radical reimagining of female agency and resistance.

Further, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she posits that "the subaltern cannot speak in a voice that is understood by the dominant discourse" (Spivak, 1988, p. 90). This assertion underscores the profound difficulty faced by marginalized groups, or subalterns, in making their voices heard within the frameworks established by dominant, often hegemonic, discourses. According to Spivak, the dominant discourse, which is typically shaped by those in positions of power, systematically excludes and misrepresents the voices of the oppressed, rendering them inaudible and inaccessible to those

who wield authority. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Dopdi Mejhen in *Draupadi* offers a compelling counter-narrative to Spivak's argument. Devi's depiction challenges the notion that the subaltern's voice is inherently inaudible or incomprehensible to dominant discourses. Dopdi, as a subaltern woman, embodies a form of resistance that is both powerful and expressive, transcending the barriers of caste, class, and gender that attempt to suppress her voice. Even when her literal voice is suppressed by the oppressive state apparatus, Dopdi communicates a potent message through her actions and choices.

Her refusal to cover her body after being subjected to brutal violence becomes a powerful act of defiance against the forces that seek to dominate and control her. This act of uncovering is not merely a personal gesture but a profound statement of resistance that challenges the very structures of oppression. By rejecting the imposed norms of modesty and dignity, Dopdi subverts the controlling mechanisms of the state and patriarchal society. Her body, exposed and violated, becomes a site of radical resistance and a declaration of agency. Through this symbolic act, Devi illustrates how the subaltern can indeed speak and resist in ways that go beyond traditional verbal expressions. Dopdi's resistance thus operates on multiple levels, defying the constraints imposed by systemic oppression and asserting a form of agency that challenges the prevailing power structures. In doing so, Devi reimagines the possibilities of subaltern resistance and highlights the capacity of marginalized voices to assert their presence and challenge dominant narratives.

Her defiance is unshakeable. It leaves Senanayak, someone who prided himself on knowing the enemy very well, feeling afraid of 'an unarmed target.' Unlike her namesake in *Mahabharata*, Dopdi has no savior. Perhaps because of that she is assertive and not passive. Dopdi does not submit to the State's idea of violence and moralities. She turns it on its head, refusing to become ashamed or bowed down by their depravity. She showcases courage even amidst such unimaginable violence. Thus, Dopdi subverts all notions around female oppression and completely owns them. She laughs out loud which confuses Senanayak. His subordinates think Dopdi has gone crazy. But that thought itself is ingrained in a vicious patriarchal idea that women easily turn hysterical under pressure. Dopdi instead shows her command over the situation by laughing uncontrollably. Dopdi was expected to be ashamed of her nakedness but she rightfully and menacingly confronts the perpetrators instead, throwing a challenge to them to do worse to her.

Draupadi was one of those few. That is why she is considered by many as the first feminist of Indian mythology because of her resilience, and nonconformity to male dominated religious hierarchy Ganguli, C. (1990). *Mahabharata*. Devi's narrative is also examined by Audity Nowshin in *Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories*, where it is noted that "Dopdi's resistance is not just against the immediate violence she faces but against the historical and systemic oppression of her community" (Nowshin, 2019, p. 45). This highlights the intersectional nature of Devi's critique, which not only addresses gender-based violence but also the broader socio-political structures that perpetuate inequality.

In *Draupadi*, Devi subverts the traditional roles assigned to women in Indian literature by presenting a character who is both a victim of patriarchal violence and an active agent of her own resistance. Shubhpreet Sandhu, in her essay "Resonances of Patriarchy, Crime, and Confrontation in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*,"

discusses how Devi "challenges the conventional depiction of women as passive recipients of male violence" (Sandhu, 2020, p. 67). Dopdi's refusal to be shamed by her captors, and her subsequent confrontation with them, symbolizes a radical rethinking of female agency within a patriarchal society.

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* reconfigures the portrayal of female agency in Indian literature by challenging the normative constructs of honor and modesty that are often imposed on women. In her work, Devi defies the stereotypical depiction of women as passive victims of patriarchal violence. This is particularly evident in Dopdi Mejhen's refusal to cover her naked, mutilated body after being tortured by the police. As Sarkar notes, the act of uncovering symbolizes a rejection of the traditional values associated with female modesty. Dopdi's nakedness becomes a powerful statement of resistance, where her body, instead of being a site of shame, becomes a symbol of defiance against the state and its patriarchal apparatus.

Similarly, in Spivak's essay, she explores the limitations imposed on subaltern voices within dominant discourses. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi Mejhen transcends these limitations, offering a narrative where a marginalized woman asserts her autonomy in a society that seeks to silence her.

The intersectionality of gender, caste, and class in *Draupadi* is another critical aspect that defines Dopdi's resistance. As Nowshin argues, the historical oppression faced by tribal communities in India is central to understanding Dopdi's struggle. The story not only critiques gender-based violence but also the systemic exploitation of marginalized communities. Dopdi's identity as a tribal woman places her at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, making her resistance all the more poignant. Sandhu's analysis of *Draupadi* emphasizes the reconfiguration of female agency in the narrative. Unlike traditional narratives where women subjected to violence are portrayed as victims in need of rescue, Devi presents Dopdi as an empowered figure who reclaims her body and voice. Her final confrontation with her captors is a powerful assertion of her autonomy, challenging the conventional portrayal of women in Indian literature.

In a powerful moment of defiance, Dopdi Mejhen tears her clothes and strides naked toward Senanayak's tent, her head held high in the bright sunlight. Senanayak, taken aback by her audacious act, witnesses Dopdi's fearless confrontation. Her words, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of," encapsulate her rejection of shame and subjugation, asserting her autonomy and challenging the patriarchal authority that seeks to control her. This bold act symbolizes her refusal to be subdued or diminished by the oppressive forces around her (Devi, *Breast Stories*, translated by Spivak, 1997).

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