

Mahashweta Devi: A Voice of Marginalised

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ABSTRACT

Mahashweta Devi was not just an observer, but an authority archetypal of the subaltern, the subjugated and the overlooked population of the nation. It is due to her aggressive scripts that lots of tribal people in India could express their wretchedness. This leading Bengali author and an famous social activist transcribed sketchily on weakened existence of the marginalised and homeless people. She portrayed ruthless cruelty on the untouchables by authoritarian upper-caste landlords to recounting stories on how tribals and their ethnicities are closely wound up with the forest they live in. Mahasweta Devi is one such contemporary woman writer who brings forth all these forms of subjugation in her works. Mahasweta Devi activist zeal in her writings represents her involvement with the difficulties of the underprivileged. She lends voice to the voiceless by revealing different forms of oppression as the integral part of Indian society and also fights for their rights. Mahasweta Devi's style to subjugation is distinctive, as, majority of women writers cite. With the prevalent gender oppression of middle class or upper class women, Devi deals with the subject of gender oppression entangled within its class and caste clashes. Her activist writings, in the form of essays, short stories, plays and novels, discover the trident forms/patterns of oppression— class, caste and gender oppression. Mahasweta Devi's works clearly reflect the author's concern for the underprivileged who are deprived of their basic rights by the dominant upper classes. Devi's works do not present a glorified picture of the downtrodden but they certainly present their lives amidst adversity and exhibit their spirit and strength to resist any form of social oppressions.

Mahashweta Devi recorded the prejudices against the marginalized in her fiction. In more than hundred novels and short stories, she wrote of India's tribal communities and Maoist rebels, prostitutes and nomads, beggars and laborers. She depicts the life of these people with brutal accuracy and explores the mechanics of exploitation. Her works not only give voice to India's marginalized tribal people but also stress the abject subordination of women in Indian society. She has been able to creatively integrate her powerful approach in her writings with her direct service to her people. She ensures that their basic needs are fulfilled without losing their tribal identity. While creative writing is only one side of Mahasweta Devi there are several other dimensions to her personality as social activist, reporter, and editor. All these facets of her personality considered together distinguish her from her contemporaries. This activism is central to Devi's understanding of the role of a writer in society. She quotes in one of her interviews "I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. The sense of duty is an obsession". Her works move between fiction, history, ethnography and reportage providing a crucial antidote to the three vexed problems: bonded labour, women and development and sex trade, thus, lend themselves to readings within sociological critical frameworks. Some of her stories seem to be extensions of her activism. Some critics think that

her writings address the concerns of postcolonial theory. They find in her fiction subaltern women and the undocumented history of an oppressed people. Her writing also offers a critique of the Bengal Renaissance which formed her literary personality. She does this by her absorption with the non-Sanskrit universe of the tribal's, right down to the nonsanskritic names and words they use and pronounce. "Breast Stories" is a collection of short stories about the objectification of the female body. Draupati, a short story in "Breast Stories" is selected for the present study. Gayathri Spivak comments that the "breast" is not a symbol, though they are titled "Breast Stories". In Draupati breast is transformed from an erotic object into an object of torture and revenge. It is obvious that the name is derived from the epic Mahabarata, where she is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. Lord Krishna saves Draupadi from becoming a victim of male lust unclathing her. This Dopdi of our story is an aboriginal, is easily stripped by men. She is gang raped by police and refuses to be clothed. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. The story signifies that this is the place where male leadership stops. In the spring of 1967, there was a peasant uprising in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal. This peasant movement was led by the middle-class intellectual's spawning an indigenous agrarian leadership led by the lower classes including tribals.

The target of this movement was the oppression of the lawless peasants and workers. The naxalites of the West Bengal allied with the freedom fighters of East Bengal and in guerilla like insurgency dominated the politics of the time. The Indian government cracked down on the naxalites with extra-ordinary severity in 1971 destroying rebellious rural population and tribals as well. This story "Draupadi" is set under the background of naxalites. Draupadi is the name of the central character; probably she cannot pronounce the name hence Dopdi. Her Brahmin mistress gave this name to her at birth. Dopdi and her husband Dulna Mejhen work as farmlands. They were the chief instigators in the murder of Suraj Sahu, their landlord who occupied upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought. These villages were cordoned off by the police and people machinegunned. Dopdi and her husband faked their own death and escaped. Ever since they had been couriers for the activists constantly travelling and communicating vital information. As they were adept in the art of evasion and hiding the Special Forces got frustrated, butchered many sandals in various districts of West Bengal, yet they cannot trace Dopdi and Dulna. For a long time Dulna and Dopdi went underground in Neanderthal darkness. At last Dulna was killed while drinking water in a pool in Jharkani forest which had been the impenetrable hide out of the activist. The special forces led by Senanayak, the seasoned soldier, were mechanically searching for "Dopdi Mejhi, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Mejhi (deceased) information whether dead or alive and assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees". The posters were everywhere. Ultimately, she was caught and gang raped by the men in uniform following the instructions of Senanayak "make her do the needful". This is the tragic tale of Draupadi. Draupadi acquires a new identity. The process of acquisition involves an escape from the limitations, vulnerabilities and clumsiness of the physical body into a new consciousness. The mutilation and violent abuse of her body did not make her abjectly surrender. She defies her torturer and tormentor Senanayak. She is victimized by his senseless anger. She refuses to be clothed after the sexual exploitation and prefers to be naked. He was stunned at her dignity when she refused to comply in performing her duties as a subservient woman. He expected that Draupadi would beg and plead for mercy. After being raped and beaten, she did not succumb to her bodily craving of thirst and remains silent. Draupadi in defiance of her tortures refuses to give them the satisfaction of seeing her begging. When the soldiers hand her a pot of water, rather than satisfying her thirst, she chooses to pour it on the ground. This act is a deliberate act of defiance. This is quite puzzling for Senanayak as he has an inflated sense of his capabilities as an army officer and also because of his male chauvinism. He walks out surprised and sees Draupadi naked and refuses to be clothed. She challenges Senanayak to see how they made her the object of his search, his obsession. In essence, she tells Senanayak that her spirit cannot be destroyed and she transcends her gender limitations. She throws a challenge "you strip me, but how can you clothe

me again? Are you a man?" She can only be clothed by herself, or her God. Though he had the power to strip her mentally she remained strong. It is so easy to try to destroy a person; in the event that one does succeed, how do you bring back their self-worth? "Draupadi's black body comes even closer Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand". She voices in deafening shrill "terrifying, a sky splitting. What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" and she spits a bloody gab on the front of his white bush shirt. She says, "There is not a man here that I should be ashamed.... what more can you do? Come on, Kounter me—come on, Kounter me"—She pushes Senanayak with her two-mangled breasts. This great soldier becomes afraid for the first time to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. Draupadi made her mangled body a powerful weapon of resistance that can never be destroyed with the words. She is not ashamed of her condition. To be ashamed is to satisfy Senanayak's male ego. By refusing to be ashamed she asserts her femaleness and refusal to surrender because of physical suffering and abuse. By refusing to fit in to the man's image of woman she destroys his ego. Senanayak is an elderly Bengali Specialist in combat and extreme left politics. He understands to destroy. He is not to be trifled with. He is a survivor. He changes and adjusts to suit to the shifting structures of the system he works in Dulna's dead body, he throws as a bait doesn't bring Draupadi. He finds her only when she is betrayed by the half breed Santals Shomai and Budhana – Draupadi calls them the fruits of men war – born out of consensual sex or adultery or rape. The defiant attitude of Draupadi overwhelms and frightens him. Maybe she looks like Kali that came to destroy him and his oppressive system. Draupadi is a representation of a female figure ready to stand up for her rights and her beliefs and as a female controlling her destinies. In essence, she asserts herself as the male figure and Senanayak in turn becomes the female figure. He is terrified of Draupadi and is unable to anticipate her next move. Draupadi faced with a situation that could make any woman go mad, uses her plight to her advantage to make her torturer mad and confused. Senanayak an expert in tracking down insurgents and capturing them and in "retrieval of information" finds an enemy he can neither understand nor destroy. We leave him at the end of story a man totally confused with his wits paralyzed. Mahasweta Devi presents how sexual politics perpetuate the oppressive system and destroy those to destabilize the system. But Draupadi refuses to be destroyed. Devi turns her literary texts into a subversive act exposing the ideological contradictions of a hegemonic system. The Hegemonic factor creates and maintains social and political system. They marginalize and exclude vulnerable social groups in the name of order. The fate of such groups is the concern of Mahasweta Devi. She explores the way in which Indian Women have occupied a subaltern position that is oppressed both by traditional notion of patriarchy and by colonialism.

To conclude, the Post-modern era has strengthened and given wide scope for women writers. They have started questioning the age-old oppression and expressing their anger and frustration over the issues of women's exploitation in their works. Mahasweta Devi's short stories and novellas represent the saga of the tribals and other depressed communities. The story of Draupadi presents the nature of female experiences under the mechanism of male oppression. The extraordinary mental strength of Draupadi is observed when she refuses to be clothed. Draupadi refuses to be a stereotype female accepting her fate conscious of her vulnerabilities. She becomes an activist refusing to play the traditional role

assigned to women. She is proud of her tribal men, her forefathers who stood guard over their women's blood in black armor. Senanayak is a foil to them. Draupadi is a character created outside the domestic sphere and capable of moral development. She transcends social definitions of femininity. She wrote about the struggles of marginalised but, she never permitted her own voice dominate. The sequence of events belonged to the oppressed communities that was only furthered by her skilled writing. Hence, the author's discourse of class, caste and gender oppression reveals a unique narrative of the downtrodden, his / her oppression and finally his / her resistance to oppression

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