



CENTER PERIPHERAL DICHOTOMY AS DELINEATED IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *DRAUPADI*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is a contemporary tribal Indian Writer in English and a social activist who portrays the social issues in all her literary works. She is undoubtedly a savior for marginalized tribal women as she is not only portrayed their problems in her literary works but also is highlighted their feminist qualities. Among her women protagonists, Dopdi, a revolutionary character, is introduced as the representation of Indian tribal women in the story *Draupadi*, which is one of the short stories (trilogy) of *Breast Stories*. Dopdi fights for the basic amenities of tribal people along with her husband. The Government proclaims them as Naxalites, and also start their hunt for Dopdi under the team of Senanayak. Senanayak, the chief army officer represents himself as the embodiment of Power Center, reminds the readers of Prospero, the agent of civilization who has exercised his hegemonic power upon the indigenous Caliban through his magic wand in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Dopdi comes across a terrible situation when she is caught. Her sufferings in the hands of Senanayak and his team cannot be an imaginable one. She is gang raped. Her encounter with Senanayak after her rape, spotlights Dopdi as an indomitable spirit of Periphery, who is always expected to be mute. Her multiple questions are left unanswered by the Power Center. This research paper on Mahasweta Devi's Short Story *Draupadi* analyses the antagonism between periphery and Centre that dismantles the fragmented notion of Center worship.

Key Words: Centre Peripheral Dichotomy, Antagonism, Hegemony, Draupadi's encounter, Marginality, Senanayak's atrocity, Modern Dopdi.

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The Centre, Peripheral dichotomy has been the quintessential problem of post-colonialism and it has never left the commonwealth country like India. The upper caste and elite people in the society exercise their power against the tribal, poor people. The indigenous people are pushed towards the margins by the atrocious nature of the bourgeois people. Most of the commonwealth countries are divided into two extremes. One is power and another one is poverty. The second one is always

estranged, engulfed and suppressed by the first one. Inequality is the main cause of marginality.

J.M. Waghmare opines in *Literature of Marginality* that Marginalized and indigenous people are left with fear, insecurity, exploitation and injustice. Marginalized sections of society are generally beyond the pale of the dominant culture. Their existence is, by and large, peripheral. All cultures and societies, advanced or dis-advanced have power centers in their corpus. (16).The

marginalized people lack cohesiveness and strength as they consciously or unconsciously part themselves from the power centres and so they grope in the dark for survival and they struggle for their empowerment as well. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, the short story trilogy of *Breast Stories* is one of the finest examples of the Centre, Peripheral antagonism that affect the lives of the poor subaltern tribal men and women. The protagonist in the story Dopdi represents herself as the voice for other voiceless marginalized tribal people in the Centri-focal universe.

Mahasweta Devi's tribal Dopdi is fighting for her survival, food and water. The writer etches out the plight of the tribal people in words. She depicts how utter helplessness can finally lead to resistance or even rebellion. Twenty seven year old Dopdi Mejhén has developed her inclination towards a Naxalite Movement in India and is on the wanted list, due to her active role in Operation Bakuli in 1971. In fact the whole plot revolves around Dopdi Mejhén's career as a Naxalite. The term 'Naxalites' also referred to as the 'Naxals' describes a strange group that adopts violent strategies against feudal landlords and others in power that exploits the poor landless labourers and tribal people. Their claim is that they are fighting against exploitation and oppression in order to create a society devoid of class structures and hierarchies. The Government wanted Naxal Dopdi even has a police dossier:

Dossier: Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhuma, Burdwan, Murshidabad, and Bankura. 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 draught, not surrendering those three young men to the police. (*Draupadi* 19-20)

Their fight was for survival and when that is at stake than any action, their every action is justified. The feudal and imperialist mindset fails to give a human character to a tribal who is perceived only as a dark

bodied and wild untouchable who can't even have the right to draw water from the wells. He is the proverbial 'other' who has been given a marginalized identity by the dominant hegemonic Hindu society.

Subaltern Tribal People are the victims of the post-colonial India. Post-colonial Indian tribal that Devi reflects is the one, whose reality cannot be contained in mere Manichean Binary opposites. A.S. Dasan says that the, Manichean binaries are Eurocentric and stop at/with ideological abstractions and theorizing. In the colonial context, they may be tenable modes of apprehending reality. In Devi's sociological imagination, the notion of nation and national identity as one unified entity collapses under the weight of displacement and dislocation of the tribal identity (80). Guha who criticizes Indian Nationalism for its elitist bias, considers the peasantry as the principal representatives of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has rightly modified Guha's proposition by making clear relationship of the peasantry to the proletariat. Although Gramsci's concept of hegemony which is mentioned by Thomas Peter in *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, as fundamentally "a generic and formal theory of social power" (220).

Mahasweta points out the need for change in Indian system against the marginalized people in her *Introduction to the Collection* as, "Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics" (4). The first story in *Breast Stories Draupadi*, is caught between two constructive formulas: the first one is the law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression, and the other is the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectuals and rural struggles. *Draupadi* revolves around the female character named Dopdi. Devi introduces her heroine, "between two uniforms and between two versions of her name" (19). Though the name Dopdi remembers the mythological Draupadi, it is tribalized.

The ancient mythological Draupadi, is a most popular heroine in *Mahabharata*. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are the cultural

credentials of the so called Indian Aryan civilization. The tribes predate Aryan invasion. And all the more they have no right to use heroic Sanskrit names. The domesticated Hindu names were given Dopdi at birth by her mistress, in the usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor's wife toward the tribal bond servant. To speculate upon this role *Mahabharata* itself in its colonial function in the interest of the so-called Aryan Invaders of India. Indian culture is noted for monogamy. But in *Mahabharata* the woman character 'Draupadi' is the only person to look at example for polyandry, unlike a common system of marriage in India. Devi's story questions this 'singularity', by making 'Dopdi' first in comradesly activist, monogamous marriage and then in the situation of multiple rape.

After escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner and hence they can inform their comrades about their targets. In their movement they too are soldiers, and they too are fighting for their rights. But Senanayak and other real soldiers act like hunters and the tribals are the hunted. The wild animal can easily be located and hunted down near a water hole so the "soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water" (Draupadi 23).

All the measures are taken for Dopdi's entrapment. Senanayak uses the body of Dulna as bait thinking that Dopdi will surely come to take the body but she doesn't fall prey to this trap. Senanayak works by the motto of "apprehension and elimination" (Draupadi 23) and like any imperialist understands that he is performing a superior duty by which the bloodshed and atrocities committed by him are justified and will be erased from the memory with passage of time. Senanayak constructs a different story. He is an army officer, captures the degraded Dopdi in order to fulfill the law.

Devi portrays Senanayak "as the pluralist aesthetes of the First World". He maintains and believes what he is taught and follows his duty without any hesitation. In this he not only shares kinship with Shakespeare's Prospero but also with Conrad's Kurtz who declared in *Heart of Darkness*, "Exterminate all the brutes" (50). And it is his soul's

duty to civilize them even by killing them. Writing about Senanayak the villain of the story, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reflects that "in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First World scholar in search of the Third World" (Draupadi 01).

It is said that Senanayak looks to decipher Draupadi's song. For both sides of the rift within himself, he finds analogies in *Western Literature: Hochhuth's The Deputy, David Morell's First Blood*. He will shed the guilt when the time comes. His self-image for that uncertain future is Prospero. Spivak's approach to this fiction is "deconstructive practice". She clearly shares, "and unease that would declare avant-garde theories of interpretation too elitist to cope with revolutionary feminist material".

Dopdi, on the other hand, a Santal woman is considered as marginalized. His role in the story is assumable. He willingly wants to participate in so-called civilizing mission because for him it is duty and only truth to deal with. Spivak mentions, "He follows the necessities and contingencies of what he sees as his historical moment" that reflects his character clearly. Very soon Dopdi Mejhen is apprehended and understanding her defeat she readies herself for the next action of warning her comrades:

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. (34).

On being 'apprehend' Senanayak wants a complete submission from Dopdi and for that she is shamed to the core and turned into an object of gaze and derision. When the dinner hour approaches Senanayak walks out of the camp after ordering his men to "Make her. Do the needful" (35).

Dopdi is made as naked in public. After the captivation she expects that she will be tortured to the core and will be killed. But she could not have expected that she will be unclothed and gang raped. She stands in front of the enemy group that reminds the incident where Draupadi of *Mahabharata* is brought to stand among the men in the palace. Both Draupadi and Dopdi are in utter shameful place,

wherein the first one is frightened and started praying God to save her modesty. But the modern Dopdi with utter fearlessness let the enemy group to torture her. In a bid to subjugate her body, mind and soul Dopdi is raped repeatedly as she loses and gains consciousness during the ordeal. Her oppressors believe that this form of oppression will weaken her and will force her to name her tribal comrades. Although scarred for life, she still possesses an indomitable spirit and thus refuses to ask for water when her throat is parched.

Though the body is feeble and painful, she makes her mind to stand stubborn. She goes directly with her naked body to the camp, where Senanayak stays. She wants to stop the sheer atrocity that is provoked by the male power on so many women tribal victims. She wants to teach a lesson to Senanayak, who is considered as an embodiment of the patriarchal society and the Government who tend to control subaltern women through the sets of laws (makes women are in their shoes), which cannot be suitable for men. Dopdi has never tried to save her modesty, which is often questionable for Indian women.

Dopdi's position in the story is the position of a marginalized who will never speak or who cannot be spoken. However, she breaks this thought and raises her voice. She stops Senanayak to move further and let him know the 'unspoken' voice of a woman. Her struggles to become independent or liberates her country gets a shape while she stands in-front of Senanayak that scared him. As an unyielding person, she does not respond the crowd and does not give up her ideologies that results heavy wounds in her body and removal of clothes from her body. As Devi said, "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (37).

Though the whole story revolves around Dopdi Meihen's Naxal career as stated earlier, it is the final scene that has gained a lot of importance and gone through world- wide criticism on the abuse of women and their sexuality. Devi presents harsh realities of the revolutionary movements in an unstrained fashion. She gives a true account of how a systematic genocide, silently authorized and

legitimized by the governmental institutions in the form of sexual assault and murder reduce the status of women belonging to the lower classes and the tribal groups to a subhuman level of existence. Nobody- be it the government or its agents who perpetrate the crimes- seems to suffer from any kind of guilt in doing so. Unfortunately, it is the victim who wilts under guilt and shame. Mahasweta Devi makes it very explicit through Draupadi's reaction that the physical body that experiences torture and humiliation is an effective mode of resistance and transference of the guilt on the shoulders of the perpetrator himself.

Dopdi rewrites the story that tells the story of a marginalized woman who instantly turns herself into 'subject: I' from being 'object: her'. Yashode Bhatt says in her *The Image of Women in Indian Literature*, "Violence, in general, is a coercive mechanism to assent one's will over another, in order to prove or feel a sense of power. Those in power against the powerless can perpetuate it. Any individual or group facing the threat of coercion or being disciplined to act in a manner required by another individual or group is subject to violence" (67).

Spivak says, "Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops" (11). She also adds, "I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is (as heroic as) Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative scared text as proof of male power- could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction." (11)

Devi's portrayal of the tribal subalterns is a parabolic representation of post-colonial India is a mere complex and complicated phenomenon. Resil B. Mojares comments, "Exploitation, debt bondage, and the state's apathy and neglect had reduced people to a subhuman existence" (2). The predicament of an essentially unorganized women who are robust even in their suffering and pain, and of course in their resistance too that are exposed in the fiction. Devi's fascination with the idea of resistance gives a glimpse of what the victims are

capable of despite their predicament, capable of rising like the apocryphal phoenix.

The predicament of the extremity of the suppression on indigenous tribal people is absolutely their resistance. Devi highlights this at the concluding part, "For the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (37), is a powerful and evocative statement that suggests that her Dopdi is not same all the way to the Mythological character Draupadi in *Mahabharata* (who tried to save her modesty with yards of miraculous sari supplied by Kannan, believed as the incarnation of Krishna). Draupadi plays a pivotal role in the epic as she is the one who was responsible for the great battle *Mahabharata* between Pandavas and Kauravas.

Mahasweta Devi reconstructs the myth of subaltern woman as her protagonist breaks away from the shackles of false notions of shame. Devi's skill of envisioning myth is appreciated by Radha Chakravarty in *Mahasweta Devi Critical Perspectives*:

One of the most notable features of Mahasweta's writing is the visionary, utopian or myth-making impulse that acts as a counterbalance to her dystopian, 'forensic,' critical perspective on the contemporary world. (108)

The army officer, Senanayak is dumb-founded in front of the tribal rebel, and failed to ask the authoritative ontological questions, what is this? or How dare you come? Senanayak, the Bengali army officer in *Draupadi* is portrayed as a Willy, imaginative, corrupt and of course has full of Keatian Negative Capability.

Draupadi is a scathing attack on the charades of the government and its various agencies that on the one hand, promise all kinds of privileges, rights and emancipation from all shackles and on the other hand, slyly deny them basic human constitutional rights and civil liberties. It is a play that exposes the powerful interplay of politics and history that has deprived a whole community of life's basic pleasures. Political exploitation in all its true colours is graphically expressed in a disquieting manner that leaves the reader guilty and ashamed.

The readers can experience the pain that is neither cathartic in its effect nor therapeutic. Instead it is a continuous, nagging pain that lingers

in the heart, a pain that creates a sense of loss of hope in humanity and makes one aware of the degeneracy and brutality of mankind. Yet at the same time, Mahasweta Devi openly celebrates the resilient spirit of the lower classes and the untouchable who display an immense mental toughness. Though the plot leaves the readers with a sense of shock and remorse, the Promethean nature of man, which is highly dominant among the oppressed that survive against all odds, instils a hope that they may change destinies and give a better future for generations to come. In this context, Draupadi's act can be seen as an act that subverts the exploitative system and empowers the whole peripheral community.

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