

Draupadi: An Ecopsychological Reading**Reena Kumari**

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Abstract

Ecopsychology, as a field, explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the psychological dimensions of ecological issues. In Mahasweta Devi's seminal writings like 'Breast Stories', ecopsychological themes emerge in the depiction of the interconnectedness between human society and the environment, particularly in the context of marginalized communities and their struggles against exploitation and environmental degradation. 'Draupadi,' a story from Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Stories," is a poignant narrative that explores themes of gender, caste oppression, and resistance within the context of rural India. Set against the backdrop of tribal communities in post-colonial India, the story follows Dopdi, a tribal woman, who becomes a symbol of defiance against the oppressive forces of patriarchy and caste hierarchy. Through Dopdi's character, Devi challenges traditional notions of femininity and womanhood, portraying her as a fierce, unapologetically outspoken figure who refuses to be silenced by societal norms. Dopdi's invocation of the mythological figure Draupadi serves as a powerful metaphor for the resilience and agency of women in the face of systemic injustice. The paper delves into the complexities of caste dynamics, highlighting how Dopdi's tribal identity intersects with her gender to subject her to multiple layers of oppression. Yet, despite facing unimaginable brutality, Dopdi's spirit remains unbroken, symbolizing the indomitable strength of marginalized communities in their struggle for justice and dignity. In "Draupadi," Mahasweta Devi masterfully intertwines themes of gender, caste oppression, and resistance, offering a searing critique of the social and political forces that perpetuate systemic injustice. Through Dopdi's defiant courage and unwavering resilience, Devi celebrates the power of individual and collective resistance to challenge entrenched systems of oppression.

Keywords: Gender, caste oppression, resistance, tribal communities, patriarchy, caste hierarchy

Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Stories" stands as a compelling testament to the intricate relationship between the female body and the natural environment, offering a profound exploration of ecopsychology. Through a series of narratives, Devi delves into the lives of marginalized women whose bodies bear the scars of environmental degradation and social injustice. These stories vividly depict the physical and psychological trauma inflicted upon the female characters as a result of ecological devastation, thus reflecting the interconnectedness of human health and the environment.

One of the most striking aspects of 'Breast Stories' is Devi's portrayal of the female body as a site of resistance and resilience in the face of environmental exploitation. In stories such as "Breast-Giver" and "Behind the Bodice," Devi highlights how women's bodies become battlegrounds for power and control in patriarchal societies. The female characters in these narratives are often subjected to objectification and commodification, as their bodies are exploited for economic gain or political ends. However, despite their marginalized status, these women display remarkable strength and agency, using their bodies as instruments of defiance against oppressive systems.

Through her poignant and powerful storytelling, Mahasweta Devi challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of environmental degradation and social inequality. 'Breast Stories' serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need to address environmental injustices and reclaim our ecological heritage for the well-being of present and future generations. By centering the experiences of marginalized women whose bodies bear the scars of ecological exploitation, Devi's work offers a compelling vision of ecopsychology that recognizes the intrinsic connection between human health and the natural environment. In her essay "Ecopsychology: A Feminist Perspective on Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver'," Dipannita Datta explores how Devi's narrative exposes the patriarchal exploitation of both women's bodies and the natural environment, highlighting the interconnectedness between gender oppression and ecological degradation (Datta, 2008). Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist and environmental activist, have emphasized the importance of integrating ecopsychological perspectives into broader discourses on environmental justice and sustainability. Shiva's work, including "Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development" (Shiva, 1988), underscores the intrinsic linkages between ecological well-being, social

justice, and psychological resilience, advocating for holistic approaches to environmental activism that recognize the interdependence of human and non-human life.

Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' is a literary masterpiece that intricately weaves together the themes of environmental degradation, social injustice, and psychological trauma, portraying the intimate relationship between humans and the natural world. Set amidst the socio-political turmoil of the Naxalite movement in India, the story explores the lives of marginalized tribal communities whose existence is deeply entwined with the ecology of the forests they inhabit. Through the lens of ecopsychology, which examines the psychological interdependence between individuals and their environment, this paper endeavors to delve deeper into the ecological dimensions of 'Draupadi', shedding light on the profound impact of environmental exploitation on human psyche and society.

At the heart of 'Draupadi' lies the exploitation and destruction of forests, which serves as a metaphor for the larger socio-economic forces at play. Devi vividly depicts the plundering of natural resources by capitalist interests, leading to rampant deforestation and ecological devastation. The forests not only provide sustenance and livelihoods for the tribal communities but also hold profound cultural and spiritual significance. Thus, the degradation of forests represents not just the loss of habitat but also the erasure of cultural identity and heritage.

The protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen, emerges as a symbol of resistance against the encroachment of external forces on the tribal way of life. This sentiment is echoed by ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, who emphasizes the intrinsic connection between indigenous cultures and the environment, stating, "In indigenous cultures, the Earth is our mother, the rivers are our sisters, and the forests are our ancestors" (Shiva 63). Furthermore, 'Draupadi' delves into the psychological ramifications of environmental degradation on the characters, particularly the marginalized tribal communities. Ecopsychology posits that humans possess an innate connection with nature, and disruptions in the natural environment can have profound effects on mental health and well-being. The displacement of indigenous tribes from their ancestral lands engenders a deep sense of alienation and despair, leading to psychological disintegration among the characters in the novel.

Dopdi Mejhen's traumatic experiences at the hands of the authorities, including torture and sexual violence, culminate in her ultimate act of defiance and self-destruction.

Her tragic fate serves as a poignant reminder of the psychological toll of environmental injustice and dispossession. Echoing this sentiment, psychologist Theodore Roszak argues that the destruction of the natural environment harms ecosystems and damages the psyche, stating, “The assault on the natural environment is an assault on the human soul” (Roszak 29).

Moreover, ‘Draupadi’ underscores the dialectical relationship between ecological degradation and social inequality. The exploitation of natural resources exacerbates existing disparities in power and privilege, as marginalized communities bear the brunt of environmental degradation. The Naxalite movement, depicted in the short story, emerges as a response to the systemic injustices perpetrated against the tribal communities, reflecting their struggle for environmental and social justice.

Dopdi Mejhen’s defiant resistance against the oppressive forces of capitalism and imperialism embodies the resilience of marginalized communities in the face of ecological destruction and social injustice. Her struggle for environmental and social justice is reminiscent of the words of environmental activist Wangari Maathai, who emphasizes the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues, stating, “In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness” (Maathai 82).

In conclusion, Mahasweta Devi's ‘Draupadi’ serves as a powerful exploration of the intricate relationship between human society and the natural environment. Through the lens of ecopsychology, the work elucidates the profound psychological ramifications of environmental degradation and displacement in marginalized communities. Dopdi Mejhen emerges as a symbol of resilience and resistance against the forces of ecological destruction, underscoring the intrinsic connection between the human psyche and the natural world. Thus, ‘Draupadi’ stands as a poignant reminder of the urgent need to address environmental injustices and reclaim our ecological heritage for the well-being of present and future generations.

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