

## **Representing Identity, Agency and the Subaltern: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi***

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### **Abstract**

The research is an analysis on Mahasweta Devi's revisionary feminist short story "Draupadi" (1988), it captures the experiences of a subaltern woman within the perspective of the historical juncture. The central character Draupadi or Dopdi, as she is often referred to in the text, is involved in a social movement. While Dopdi is presented as a strong woman from the outset, it is at the very moment that she should become the "silenced victim" according to traditional schema that she instead emerges as an agent. In this study I will discuss the way in which this re-presentation of "coming to agency" constitutes a dismantling of the subaltern theory propounded by Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Thus asserts Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subalterns Speak?" According to the general thrust of Spivak's argument in this essay, her final assertion that the "subaltern cannot speak" denies the gendered subaltern the ability to represent herself and achieve voice agency. Spivak's contention that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" also precludes the possibility of others re-presenting the subaltern woman save as a blank or empty space. Hence the "circumscribed task" Spivak envisions for the female intellectual is to merely foreground the "space" or "absence" that according to Spivak, is the subaltern woman in discourse—Colonial, Western or Native Elite. This presentation of the gendered subaltern as completely inaccessible, and more crucially, incapable of agency or resistance leads to a problematic conclusion. I would therefore like to argue that the subaltern woman can be re-presented in imaginative writing and further, that she can be portrayed as an "agent" particularly at certain specific historical junctures.

**Key words:** subaltern, agent, dismantling, identity.

## FULL PAPER

According to the general thrust of Spivak's argument in her essay, "Can the Subalterns Speak?", she asserts that the "subaltern cannot speak" denies the gendered subaltern the ability to represent herself and achieve voice agency. Spivak's contention that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" also precludes the possibility of others re-presenting the subaltern woman save as a blank or empty space. Hence the "circumscribed task" Spivak envisions for the female intellectual is to merely foreground the "space" or "absence" that according to Spivak, is the subaltern woman in discourse—Colonial, Western or Native Elite. This presentation of the gendered subaltern as completely inaccessible, and more crucially, incapable of agency or resistance leads to a problematic conclusion: colonialism in collusion with (native) patriarchy effected a complete "erasure" of the (subaltern) woman. This is however a clearly untenable proposition (Mani 403). The 1889 description of the plight of the Hindu widow written by a widow and a potential sati herself, as Ania Loomba points out, is testimony to the fact that subaltern women, such as the figure of sati that Spivak alludes to, did in fact "speak" (237). I would therefore like to argue that the subaltern woman can be re-presented<sup>3</sup> in imaginative writing and further, that she can be portrayed as an "agent"<sup>4</sup> particularly at certain specific historical junctures. The depiction of the gendered subaltern as "an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness" (Moore Gilbert 102) is problematic on several counts. As Bart Moore Gilbert demonstrates "the more the subaltern is seen as wholly other, the more Spivak seems to construct the subaltern's identity neither relationally nor differentially, but in essentialist terms" (102). Ironically, through this representation she replicates a failure of the Subaltern Studies Scholars for which she critiqued them: the failure to consider the subaltern in relation to the other social groups around them. Further, Spivak's presentation of the gendered subaltern creates a complete victim and in turn makes the oppressor an all-powerful force. A conception of the subaltern woman as "an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness," also implies a notion of identity as fixed and unchangeable.

The text that I have chosen for analysis, Mahasweta Devi's revisionary feminist short story "Draupadi" (1988), captures the experiences of a subaltern woman within the context of the historical juncture of the "interregnum." The central character Draupadi or

Dopdi, as she is often referred to in the text, is involved in a social movement—the Naxalite movement in India. While Dopdi is presented as a strong woman from the outset, it is at the very moment that she should become the “silenced victim” according to traditional schema that she instead emerges as an agent. In this essay I will discuss the way in which this re-presentation of “coming to agency” constitutes a dismantling of the subaltern theory propounded by Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

### **Transgression, Agency and the Interregnum.**

“In the interregnum between the state as they know it and the anticipated state they struggle for,” states Neloufer de Mel, “normalcy is suspended and prevailing rules do not apply. This state of emergency encourages transgression”(18). As pointed out by her, the suspension of normalcy in a conflict situation, for instance, a resistance movement struggling for social justice as in the case of the Naxalite movement in “Draupadi,” promotes transgressions as the prevailing norms and rules no longer pertain. Such “transgressive” moments according to de Mel, often result in a re-invention of tradition and a re-inscription of the ascribed social roles particularly of women. These transformations could then result in women’s agency and empowerment. It is therefore important to examine the short story in the light of these assertions in order to ascertain how they impact on the re-presentation of the subaltern woman as an agent in the text. In “Draupadi,” when we first encounter our protagonist Dopdi, she is living in the Jharkhani forest with a group of Naxalite rebels referred to as the “young gentlemen.” The fact that such behaviour is unorthodox for a woman of the Santal tribe is brought out when Dopdi harkens back to times past with nostalgia and adoration: “Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women’s blood in black armor”(193). These reminiscences reveal several significant facts about the Santal tribe. Firstly, women were clearly “protected” by the men of the tribe as the phrase “stood guard over their women’s blood” implies. Secondly, as a group that expected and received such patriarchal “protection,” the women seem not to have engaged in warfare for Dopdi does not mention foremothers in this regard. Thus the proud reference to the “black armour” of the forefathers is also significant, as this seems to indicate that the Santal men were perhaps (good) warriors. Clearly then Dopdi’s existence in the forest as a militant in the Naxalite movement, among strange men, bereft of the protection of her husband Dulna, is

transgressive. The question then is, does she emerge as an agent? In order to answer this query an examination of Dopdi's role in the movement is important.

The crucial role Dopdi plays in the movement is first brought out through the "official reports." "In the first phase of the confrontation the fugitives, ignorant of the forest's topography, are caught easily" (190) we are told. However all this changes in the next phase for, according to the report, "they do not allow themselves to be captured in combat [...] Now it seems that they have found a trustworthy courier. Ten to one it's Dopdi" (190). Hence, Dopdi seems of vital importance to the movement. It is Dopdi who goes in to the village in search of food (191) and to "spy" on the activities of the police. For instance, "Dopdi has seen the new camp, she has sat in the *bus station* and passed the time of day, smoked a 'bidi' and found out how many *police convoys* had arrived, how many radio vans [...]" (194). Blending in to the daily activities of the village, she is able to gather information about the new camp set up in the village, about the two hundred rupee price on her head (191) and the preparations made to capture herself and the Naxalite insurgents. Further, as Dulna and Dopdi had "worked at the house of virtually every landowner, they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets [...]" (189). In the "expert opinion" of Senanayak and the *Army Handbook*, the insurgents have become a force to reckon with only through their involvement with Dopdi and her fellow tribals. This is amply illustrated when the superior "fighting power" of Dopdi and Dulna is analysed as follows:

[...] the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. [...] Dopdi and Dulna belong to the *category* of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow [...] their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. Not all gentlemen become experts in the explosion of 'chambers'; they think the power will come out of its own if the gun is held. But since Dulna and Dopdi are illiterate, their kind have practiced the use of weapons generation after generation (188).

While there is a certain amount of condescension in the way in which the superior fighting power of the two tribals is accounted for, there is also a healthy regard for their capabilities as combatants. Therefore, Senanayak's philosophy is to respect the

opposition in *theory* what ever his *practice* may be (189).<sup>7</sup> The respect and regard Senanayak has for Dopdi's capabilities are justified when considering the manner in which she destroys Dukhiram, the soldiers' jungle scout and the man she holds responsible for Dulna's death (190). Moreover, Dopdi herself is aware of this difference between her and the "gentlemen" and views it as a strength. For instance, when contemplating the way in which she should handle the policeman following her, she thinks of the "baby scythe" in her hand that so effectively killed Dukhiram and thinks "Thank God [she] is not a gentleman" for she knows that the "gentlemen" cannot have handled such a situation as efficiently and effectively as she can (190). Does this then mean that Dopdi emerges as an "agent"?

The answer to the question posed above lies in the following extract from the Stree Shakti Sanghatana recording of the experiences of women in the Telengana People's Struggle. According to them, the type of "contributory" historiography seen in the above analysis where women's participation in militant groups is "analysed and judged not according to their value or importance for women, but according to their 'use' for the movement in question" devalues the complex issues surrounding the female combatant (Mel 229). Thus if Mahasweta Devi had limited herself to such a re-presentation of the subaltern woman's role in the resistance movement, the subaltern woman would not have emerged as an agent. The word "agent" is associated with notions of free will and of exerting power and authority. An assessment of Dopdi's role in the resistance movement however reveals that although her contribution was crucial to the "success" of the movement, she is not in a position to "exert power and authority." Her actions are governed by the instructions she receives from Arijit and she models her behaviour on and adheres faithfully to the traditions of the Santals handed down to her by her forefathers. She and Dulna initially join the movement more because circumstances force them to than through personal convictions and an ideological allegiance to its cause. As she mentally prepares herself for the confrontation with the policeman who follows her, she keeps recalling the instructions and pointers she has received from Arijit and the other "gentlemen." It is Arijit's voice that acts as a guide and dictates her actions through out the sequence where she deliberately leads the policeman astray. Thus, "Arijit's voice. If anyone is caught, the others must catch the *timing* and

*change their hideout. If comrade Dopdi arrives late, we will not remain. There will be a sign of where we are gone. No comrade will let the others be destroyed for her own sake*” (Italics in original, 194). It is with these instructions in mind that Dopdi resolves to lead the policeman to the “burning ghat”—as far away from the forest and their hideout as possible. Thus as Spivak points out, the decision makers are the educated, bourgeois young men and women who have “*orient[ed]* their book learning to the soil they live on” (191). These, according to the erudite Senanayak, are the “cause of fear” (191). Apart from her loyalty to the movement and its leaders, Dopdi also remains faithful to the codes of conduct instilled in her through her tribal upbringing. She thus draws on and wishes to emulate Dulna’s actions: “Dulna died, but, let me tell you, he didn’t lose anyone else’s life. Because this was not in our heads to begin with” (194). The reason why this was never in their heads is that they still remain faithful to the traditions handed down to them by their forefathers for, “crow would eat crows flesh before Santal would betray Santal” (193). These factors according to Spivak make Dopdi a historically plausible character. Unfortunately however, it is these very loyalties that enable Senanayak to predict her behaviour and in the end apprehend her. Thus, within this context, although Dopdi is a strong, resilient female character, transgressing the gender and cultural norms of her society, she does not appear to be an “agent” as yet.

### **Agency After Rape?**

At a glance, there appears to be little connection between the words “agency” and “rape” save perhaps as antonyms. Where women are concerned, rape, with its connotations of violation, imposition of force, destructive violence perpetrated on the body and the psyche, is more commonly aligned with the status “victim.” Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in her analysis of narratives with rape as a central theme states that the texts of male writers like Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and E.M Forster’s *A Passage to India*, result in either the death of the raped woman as is the case in *Clarissa* or her “disappearance” as happens in *A Passage to India*.<sup>8</sup> Thus *life* after rape is itself a unique feature of feminist fiction.<sup>9</sup> Sunder Rajan sees two marked differences in the presentation of rape in the two male authored texts and the feminist texts discussed by her. The structural location of the rape, she maintains, is significant. Thus, in the three feminist texts the rape scene occurs at the beginning of the narrative and on the one hand pre-empts expectations of its later

occurrence and on the other it is granted a purely functional purpose and narrative interest is placed instead on what follows rather than on the rape. Both strategies effectively diminish rape. In contrast, both Richardson and Forster place the scene of rape at the core of their narratives ‘so that the plots describe a graph of climax and anticlimax around that point. Although rape is thus placed at the centre of the narrative, neither novel actually presents the scene of rape. This absence results in a blurring of events, which gives *A Passage to India* its “mystique.” In *Clarissa*, the device “absolves” both parties from the implications of rape for neither Clarissa nor Lovelace is properly conscious at the time. Further, this “absence” also results in rape being treated as a “female fiction” or “fabrication” and consequentially doubts are cast on the credibility of the women’s testimonies ( 71-74). A further problem in literary representations of rape is that there is always the danger of replicating the act in the narrative. Sunder Rajan’s analysis of the scenes of rape, their positioning and their narrative implications are useful for an examination of the scenes of rape in “Draupadi” and its significance for the question of “agency.”

In “Draupadi” the “scene” of rape is presented not in a voyeuristic mode but from the point of view of the woman who was raped. Thus, after Senanayak leaves Dopdi following his unsuccessful “questioning session,” with “Make her. *Do the needful*” (195), the narrative re-enacts Dopdi’s consciousness and loss of consciousness, opening and closing of eyes. The first rape sequence is not actually presented as Dopdi loses consciousness. It is rather Dopdi’s feelings that are offered. “Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moon light she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she had been made up right’ (195). There is however no room for doubt. The brutality of the rape is brought out in its stark reality through these “impressions.” Since Dopdi regains consciousness after this, the second rape sequence is actually presented but it effectively avoids voyeurism. Sunder Rajan asserts that the location where the rape takes place is also significant. In *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India*, for instance, rape is enacted in private spaces (Clarissa’s bed chamber and the Marabar caves respectively), followed by a re-emergence of the raped woman in to the public eye (the “long and elaborate public spectacle of Clarissa’s death’ and the ‘public trial of Aziz , which is equally [...] the trial of Adela”). “The Succession of



private ordeal by public display” states Sunder Rajan, “could not be more pronounced and [...] more traumatic” (76). In stark contrast to these re-presentations, Mahasweta Devi in her depiction blurs and merges the lines between the public and the private. The private pain of Dopdi’s rape and the “private” perversions of the police offices are enacted in the very public space of the police camp. Thus, the private becomes the public and the political.

Unlike in the three women’s texts discussed by Sunder Rajan, the scene of rape in “Draupadi” occurs at the end of the short story. However, instead of building up to it as a kind of climax, it proves to be a “beginning.” Thus, while the apprehension of Dopdi is viewed as her end “Dopdi Mejhien is about to be *apprehended*. Will be destroyed”(194), there is a sudden metamorphosis in Dopdi. Until this moment, when “she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman*,” she remains faithful to the patriarchal (moral) code of her tribe handed down to her by her forefathers and, as Spivak points out, to the Naxalite movement as an act of faith toward Dulna (184). The voice of male authority also dictates how she should respond to the police questioning and torture. Thus, “Dopdi knows, has learned by *hearing* (italics mine) so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it” (192). Dopdi’s training has taught her to sacrifice herself for the cause. Her standards of conduct are governed by the old code of the Santal tribe and that code dictates that one must never betray the members of one’s tribe. Dopdi’s current “tribe” consists also of her comrades in arms. Thus when she is captured and first questioned and later raped and tortured she adopts a mode of passive resistance, still holding on to the patriarchal traditions that inscribed her and the instructions imbibed through repeated listening. Although she has heard what it is to be tortured, —“when they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound”—in the final scene she realises that the experiences she went through are those uniquely female ones and it is at this point that Dopdi/Draupadi metamorphosises into a powerful agent. To understand her transformation, it is important to go back to Dopdi’s plan to kill the policeman who follows her. At this point, when she knows that she is in danger of being captured she thinks, “This area is quiet enough. It’s like a maze, [...] Dopdi will



lead the cop to the burning ‘ghat’. Patitpaban of Saranda had been sacrificed in the name of Kali of the Burning Ghats” (194). Thus, when Dopdi needs to call upon her own strength, and interestingly, there are no “instructions” from the voice of male authority she can follow, she thinks of Kali. In the last sequence of events when she enters what Spivak calls the “area of lunar flux and sexual difference” ( 184) she realizes that responding to these experiences calls for a reinscription of her identity—an identity that she had retained, as a loyal and loving wife like the mythical Draupadi and a pure blooded Santal, even during her time in the forest when there was a transgression of gender and social codes. Thus, when she is asked to come to Senanayak’s tent for further questioning the next morning, Dopdi/Draupadi refuses to wash herself and thereby erase the signs of the night’s brutality. She also refuses to allow the policemen to clothe her. She challenges them with “What is the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? [...] There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed” (196). Here she challenges and derides their “masculinity.” This is a reworking of the scene of humiliation in the *Mahabharata* where the mythical Draupadi was “saved” from the humiliating experience of being stripped, through divine intervention.

Dopdi/Draupadi re-writes this script. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, “Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, her torture intimidate her, or her rape diminish her” (352). But, Sunder Rajan cautions, this should not be read as a “transcendence of suffering, or even simply as heroism” (352). It is instead she states, “simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy” (352-3). By thus refusing to share the sign system, she also becomes unpredictable. This is significant for her emergence as an agent because, for the first time, Senanayak with all his theoretical knowledge of the tribals, even about information storage in their brain cells, fails to anticipate her moves. The refusal to share the sign system also involves the articulation of an alternative identity. Thus the Draupadi identity that she has been saddled with due to the name given to her by Surja Sahu’s wife in what Spivak calls the “usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor’s wife toward the tribal bond servant” (183) is replaced with one based on the Goddess Kali. The fact that Dopdi models herself on Kali is significant for Kali, traditionally

depicted as standing on top of Shiva, symbolises female power. Significantly therefore, the description of Dopdi/Draupadi in the last scene is very similar to traditional depictions of Kali “Draupadi’s black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes her blood on her palm” and issues a challenge to Senanayak and his armed force “I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on *counter* me” (196). This last metamorphosis baffles even the all-knowing Senanayak and “for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid” (196).

The reversal of traditional gender and authority roles is complete. Senanayak and the army, the dominant males, the tormentors and authority figures, now “stand before” Dopdi as though before an almighty and powerful force. Her refusal and indeed her challenge to the men “to put [her] cloth on” is a powerful refusal to revert back to the accepted status quo and to hide or blur her new identity as a primeval female force. For, unlike Draupadi of the Mahabharata, Dopdi cannot escape her fate through divine intervention. But something much more dramatic happens. She survives the ordeal triumphantly and is thereby empowered to “become” the goddess. Her tormentors are now “terribly afraid.”

In the analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s re-presentation of Dopdi as an agent, several significant factors about agency, the subaltern woman and the “interregnum” period emerge. The interregnum period, also a period of rebellion encourages a reconstitution of gender as well as caste, class and cultural identities and a transgression of existing norms, values and codes of conduct. Such a period can and does have a powerful impact on women. However, where the re-presentation of subaltern women as agents in such “moments” is concerned, it is not merely sufficient to place the subaltern woman character within the context of such an interregnum period and in the guise of a militant. This will not always result in the empowerment of the subaltern as female as we saw in the first part of this essay. It is rather, when the personal is inextricably mixed with the political, as was the case with Dopdi at the end of the short story that she becomes an agent through a dramatic re-articulation of her identity. Such a refashioning of identity requires a definition of identity as not immutable and fixed but as something that is

contingent and variable. Thus, the crucial factor in the transformation of Dopdi in to an agent is her coming to terms with the fact that contingencies, such as the ones that she is faced with, call for a radical departure from the identity fashioned and inscribed by patriarchy and (male) authority and the appropriation of a powerful female identity.

The re-presentation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts: the subaltern woman can be re-presented in imaginative writing and she can be re-presented as an “agent.” In this sense Mahasweta Devi’s short story effectively dismantles Spivak’s contention in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” that the “subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (104). In Dopdi, we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks loudly—literally and metaphorically, for, her ‘voice [...] is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation’ (196)—and makes herself heard.

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