

Unspeakable Trauma Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi*: A Survivor's story

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Abstract:

Trauma is an effect of a devastating incident in a person's life that prevents her from recognising her own identity and causes helplessness to cope with the person's original feelings. Cathy Caruth's "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History" started a new approach which mentions *Trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradiction of experience and language.* (Baladev, 07) Trauma theory focuses on the traumatic experience that damages and destroys a person's psyche, and more importantly, creates an obstacle to making a clear linguistic representation. Trauma can be personal experiences, and collective experiences, and in this context geographical cultural and economic dimensions of a person's community have to be prioritized. Trauma can have many devastating results. It can render the person immune to any kind of human emotions and feelings. In the writings of the Jnanpith Award winner Indian Bengali Writer Mahasweta Devi, the tribal community's (especially women's) trauma and unspeakably of trauma have been narrated. *Draupadi* a story of Devi, was published in her collection *Agnigarbha* which is later translated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak into English. In this paper, the effect of the traumatic experience will be discussed on the two characters: Draupadi and Arjan Singh.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Psychological trauma, suppression, exploitation, Tribal Community, atrocities.

*Most notorious female, long wanted in many....
Draupadi*

Draupadi by Mahasweta Devi is set against the history of tribal oppression in Bengal, India. After getting freedom from the bondage of British rule the colonised section still goes on with the oppression as a sign of trauma and dependency on their new masters. This is pathetic that even after seventy-four years of independence the marginalised section of our society is still suffering from injustice, and if we try to speak about a tribal women's hardship the words 'doubly in [...] shadow' (288) come to our mind. It is a story based on the facts about the conflict between innocent tribes – who are made violent and the culprits- and the police – who exploit the tribal community. The community which worships nature is made to undergo a traumatic experience that sometimes results in violent defiance. This particular text of Mahasweta Devi is

about a tribal women's journey from bondage to freedom, and in this context, the protagonist Draupadi (or, Dopdi) has justified her struggle. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak opines in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, for if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow compared to her male counterpart (287). In this story of Devi, the suffering and pain of a tribal woman shook many people in gender and feminist studies.

Whenever there is a war there is rape and abuse of women. From the Trojan War to the Middle East conflict, rape has been a tactic of war. Women are constant victims in such wars. Their vulnerability is a curse, they suffer from birth. In this context, trauma is very common. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser says that *the ruling class uses repressive state apparatuses to dominate the working class.* (241) According to Michel Foucault, as noted in *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, the creation of modern disciplines along with their principles of order and control tends to 'disindividualize' power making it seem as if the power of the state inheres in the prison, the school, the factory and so on* (175). Mahasweta Devi in her short story *Draupadi* has presented Dopdi Mejhena, a tribal woman as a person of spine and flesh who does not bend down before the violence of unjust power of state portrayed by the figure of Senanayak. She endures extreme pains of atrocities inflicted on her by the state power. When she is subjected to the beast by the police, her body gives up but not her mind *Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. A compelled spend-eagled body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it.* (401), but still this iron lady does not get traumatized rather she has used her brutally raped body as a weapon to raise her to stand against this traumatic experience which is the driving force of the story. This incident also focuses on the mentality of patriarchy where a woman is always seen as an object of desire, a thing to win over. According to *The Communist Manifesto, the State has been claimed to be nothing more than, a committee for managing the common affairs of the Bourgeoisie* (405). The state is the machinery to control the powerless. The police are the RAS for the arbitrary laws. Here we see that the State supports landowners like Surja Sahu and suppresses the poor tribals even though they are only fighting for basic survival needs. As Gayatri Spivak mentions in the 'Translator's Forward' *By the Indian Constitution all human beings regardless of caste and creed are sacred.* (382) though depriving the tribals of their inborn rights on this planet is deliberate. Mahasweta Devi has tried to establish the message with honesty that the state and the ruling class consider the marginalized as a threat and that's why they want to make them terrified, traumatized, and controlled to keep their positions secured in the hegemonic power structure. The state's interference in the savage life of the tribals is the result of the state's panoptic nature. Mahasweta Devi has tried to portray that the rebellion only awaits the people's recognition of that fact.

Initially, Dopdi Mejhena who is the widow of a revolutionary husband was shot dead by the armed forces continues to be faithful to him and his political beliefs both as an extension of her love and social duty. She has been acting as a mere informer of the Naxals, but at the moment of her rape, and her refusal to wear clothes, for the first time she acts as a woman. In the concluding part of the story the Army officer, Senanayak has sanctioned her rape and after being raped multiple times Dopdi remains naked at her insistence. *What is the use of clothes? you can strip me, but can you clothe me again?* (402) She is arrested. In a patriarchal society, rape is synonymous with the power of manhood which causes trauma but Dopdi carries a new self-definition and becomes the active destroyer of the concept of trauma. Asserting herself as a subject instead of an object of the male narrative she constructs a meaning that Senanayak cannot

decode: *Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target.* (402). In the face of danger and humiliation Dopdi remains stoical, undaunted and undeterred, what else can they do to her now? She is like Milton's speaker in the first book of *Paradise Lost* who after the defeat says, *all is not lost; the unconquerable Will, And the study of revenge, immortal hate.* (02) she does not lose her composure. *Her black body comes even closer, and Dopdi shakes with a burst of indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing,* (402). Mahashweta Devi authorizes the voice by presenting Dopdi's consumed body as an instrumental strike against the trauma forced by male authority. Michel Foucault enlisted it as the 'instrument effect' (3) which explains the reverse mode of protest against the traumatized state of women because of male power.

The name 'Draupadi' takes us back to *The Mahabharata*, especially in a hall where the enemy chief begins to pull at her saree but she becomes infinitely clothed because of Lord Krishna's miracles. This traumatic situation in the life of the mythological queen and wife of Pandavas, Draupadi becomes a driving force for the war of Kurukshetra between two groups of cousin brothers but Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi who has been pronounced as Dopdi because of her tribal identity is not searching for any miracle of male authority to save her honour. Mahashweta Devi has decoded the meaning of 'honour' in a woman's life and established her body not to satisfy sensational attributes, but rather as an instrument to make a strong statement against male hypocrisy. She has got horrible physical torture during the entire night but has not disclosed the name of her male Comrades. Her brutally wounded body can be scrutinized and sympathized with by the male power in daylight but emotionally and psychologically she was untouched and unaffected by this incident rape'. She defiantly faces any traumatic situation and experience that would have made an ordinary person give up life. When a lady gets raped, her tortured body and frightened mind make psychologically traumatized many other women because of the false definition of the word 'chastity'. In Indian society, chastity is such an issue that has made women slaves for thousands of years. In *the Ramayana* Sita has to give fire ordeal to prove her chastity. In such a society, Draupadi is doubly victimised. Firstly, she is a victim of patriarchy and secondly, she is a victim of a class hierarchy. Mahashweta Devi's lady Dopdi dismissed the concept of trauma in this context and most importantly protested being naked and deconstructed the meaning of trauma in the mind of the oppressor after deconstructing it. The male body which dominates a naked female body during the night without getting consent from her can be subjugated along with his male psychology by that same naked female body during daytime if the sensational appeal is removed, and Devi's tribal Dopdi has used her wounded black body as arms to make the fake dignity of patriarchy questioned. At first, Senanayak used to be a source of trauma and fear for the tribals but finally, a tribal raped lady of spine proves herself a source of trauma for the exploiter and oppressor of the so-called patriarchal society. Seeing this contradiction Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts in her essay *In Other Worlds, I translated the Bengali short story into English as much for the sake of its villain Senanayak as for its title character Draupadi (or Dopdi).* (122)

The police have the responsibility of controlling the violent tribal community which kills *grain brokers, landlords, money lenders, law officers and bureaucrats.* (392) The real sufferer of the traumatic experience is Arjan Singh, his traumatic experience results in diabetes. Arjan Singh was assigned the duty of *Operation forest jharkhani.* (392) Participating experience made him

feel repellent whenever he came across a black tribal. It happened because he was told that what he had seen were the corpses of dead men. This is why he repeatedly said, *They are killing me.* (392)

Dopdi is not palimpsest though destined to lead the traumatic life of the tribal community. Her traumatic life pushes her to take revenge on those who are behind her pathetic condition. Dopdi is a fighter. She fights ferociously on behalf of all human beings. She cannot tolerate the treatment meted out to her. Dopdi, an illiterate, tribal woman is an epitome of justice and freedom. Her fight is not an individual fight. She fights for all the tribal people. Much of her traumatic experience does not come from her community. It comes from the mainstream Hindu upper caste. There is no denigration of women in the tribal community. She is the victim of social construction. She suffers unnaturally. Her suffering results from her being a woman of a tribal marginalized class. An unbearable traumatic experience is the part and parcel of tribal life. Mahasweta Devi has indirectly made it crystal clear that a woman's life becomes traumatic due to the patriarchal social construction. *Dopdi* gives glimpses of extreme torture and atrocities that the community experiences. Dopdi is the narrative of the protest against inhuman atrocities. An ordinary Dopdi undauntedly challenges the authority. She does so because her traumatic experience happened in her life, forces her to do so. She has no fear of *fear* now. In this regard, Spivak has pointed out that, *within a patriarchal and patronymic context she is exceptional, indeed an "attacker" in a sense of odd, unpaired, uncoupled.* (183) This is the difference between the Draupadi of the Mahabharata and the Dopdi of the story. Draupadi is submissive, and Dopdi is not, though both suffer more or less from the same kind of trauma. Dopdi is rebellious but her actions land her in more trouble. She is captured, harassed and raped. She is like any woman in Indian society: vulnerable to male violence. Even the times of difficulty she does not lose her composure. The way she is treated after her arrest is rocking to the readers. She is incarcerated in the traumatic experience. When she is adamant to reveal the information the police want, the officer says, make her, *Do the needful.... Then a billion moons, parts..... trying to move, she feels her arms and leaps stleapstied to four posts, sweating sticky under her ass and waist.* (401) Her walking naked to Senanayak is an indication of her robust nature in the face of humiliation and injustice. Powerless Dopdi makes Senanayak powerless: this is her power. Her nakedness is an answer to those who give her traumatic experience. She is a perfect foil to Seeta of the *Ramayana*. Dopdi can retaliate against her perpetrators. She may say *My honour does not lie in between my legs.* She survives the trauma, it only metamorphoses her.

Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi suffers from trauma but her traumatic experience results in violent reaction. Her traumatic life exposed her to many social diseases to which she reacts in her ways. She does not want to be submissive all the time. She is a woman of brave heart who knows how to overcome any situation.

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