

Body as a Site of Violence and Resistance : A Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Munshi Premchand's *Sadgati*

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Abstract

Literature of the subaltern has gained relevance as it goes out of the canon and presents a vivid picture of the unvoiced, subverted group of people. This goes beyond the stereotyped tales of power, the oppressor and delves into the marginalised world of the oppressed. This paper studies the portrayal of subaltern body as a contested political space in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Premchand's *Sadgati*. While Mahasweta Devi was a prominent Indian writer and social activist known for her powerful portrayal of marginalized communities, especially Adivasis and oppressed women, Munshi Premchand, a pioneering Hindi-Urdu writer known for his realistic portrayal of social injustice in colonial India. Both texts foreground caste oppression and systemic violence and diverge significantly in their portrayal of bodily agency. In *Sadgati*, Dukhi's body becomes an instrument of caste exploitation and ultimately a silent corpse that exposes Brahmanical cruelty. Dopdi Mejhen's violated body in *Draupadi* transforms into a site of defiance and insurgent resistance. Through the lenses of Subaltern Studies, Dalit discourse, and feminist theory, this paper argues that while Premchand depicts the body as a tragic victim of social hierarchy, Mahasweta Devi radicalizes the body into a weapon that confronts and destabilizes state power. Through a detailed descriptive analysis, this paper explores how the body functions simultaneously as a site of suffering and a site of political awakening.

Keywords : Subaltern, exploitation, marginalized, oppressor, Dalit, discourse

Introduction

The human body has consistently operated as a critical site where relations of power are both enacted and contested. Within societies structured by entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and state authority, violence does not remain confined to ideology or discourse; rather, it is inscribed materially upon the corporeal self. The paper undertakes a comparative analysis of how Mahasweta Devi and Munshi Premchand conceptualize the body as the principal locus of oppression, while simultaneously revealing its capacity for resistance.

Both narratives center on marginalized protagonists whose bodies register the effects of systemic domination. In *Sadgati*, the figure of Dukhi exemplifies the corporeal consequences of caste-based subjugation. His relentless labor, physical depletion, and eventual death expose the ritualized and normalized operations of Brahmanical authority, which regulate not only economic productivity but also touch, mobility, and dignity. The violence depicted here is structural in nature—diffused through everyday practices that appear customary yet perpetuate the dehumanization of Dalit existence.

In contrast, *Draupadi* foregrounds the body of Dopdi Mejhen as the target of overt, state-sponsored coercion. Subjected to surveillance, custodial torture, and sexual assault, her body becomes the terrain upon which the postcolonial state enforces its sovereign power. However, the narrative destabilizes this logic of domination by transforming the violated body into a site of radical defiance, thereby unsettling patriarchal and militaristic authority.

By juxtaposing these texts, this paper interrogates how distinct regimes of power—religious-caste hierarchy and militarized nationalism—discipline and inscribe violence upon marginalized

bodies. Drawing upon subaltern studies, feminist theory, and caste critique, the study contends that while the body emerges as the primary target of systemic oppression, it also functions as a potent medium through which resistance acquires political and symbolic articulation.

Premchand's *Sadgati* unfolds within the stark simplicity of a North Indian village. Dukhi, an "untouchable," approaches Pandit Ghasiram to fix an auspicious date for his daughter's wedding. From the outset, Dukhi's body is framed as submissive, contort in humility, hesitant in movement, and conscious of its tainted presence. He cannot enter the Brahmin's space effortlessly. Even his shadow threatens ritual contamination. The Pandit extracts unpaid labor from Dukhi under the guise of religious duty. Dukhi is made to chop an enormous log of wood under the scorching sun. Premchand describes his body - sweat dripping, limbs trembling, stomach empty and breath shortening. The axe grows heavier with each swing. His muscles ache, yet he continues, driven by fear and desperation. Violence of caste gets normalized into daily life. Dukhi's exhaustion and hunger remains unnoticed. The body becomes merely an instrument - valuable only for the labor it can produce. On the contrary, Pandit Ghasi Ram is described as having a glorious face - "What a godly image! Small round and plump body, shining head, full cheeks, and eyes radiating godly refulgence!" (Premchand 2). Pandit's body gets synonymous to a divine presence which ought to be revered and prayed. His presence bestows an aura of sanctity which the lower caste are presumably deprived of. The horrendous effect of casteism can also be traced throughout the conversation of Panditji and Panditayan when Dukhi mistakenly entered the house to ask for fire. "Haven't you gone blind to your dharma-karma thinking of nothing but almanacs and horoscopes? Anyone may come in freely, whether he's a chamar, or dhobi or passi. Is this the home of a Hindu, or a sarai? Ask him to get out of here, or I shall singe his face with this burning piece of wood. How dare he ask for fire?" (Premchand 2). The extent of caste difference went to the extreme as even the hue and cry of the chamars in agony was considered ominous - "A chamar's crying is unpropitious." (Premchand 4)

When Dukhi collapses and dies, the narrative sharpens its critique. His corpse becomes a problem of pollution. The Brahmin who exploited him refuses to touch the dead body. Instead, it is dragged with a rope like an animal carcass. In this grotesque moment, Premchand reveals the ultimate dehumanization of the Dalit body: even in death, it is denied dignity. Dukhi's body, thus, moves from laboring flesh to lifeless object. It never achieves resistance. It bears violence silently. His death exposes the cruelty of caste but does not disrupt it. The system remains intact. The body is annihilated. Dukhi's death in the short story marks the most brutal culmination of caste oppression in the story. Throughout the narrative, his body functions as an instrument of unpaid labor—sweating, bending, chopping, enduring. Yet once he collapses under the weight of exhaustion and hunger, that same body instantly loses even its economic utility. In life, it could be exploited; in death, it becomes a burden. This transition from exploited laborer to unwanted corpse exposes the extreme fragility of Dalit existence within caste hierarchy. The Brahmin's response to Dukhi's death is not grief, guilt, or even shock. Instead, it is anxiety—an anxiety rooted in ritual purity. The central concern is not that a man has died while serving him, but that an "untouchable" corpse lies within the Brahmin's premises. The presence of the dead body threatens ritual contamination. Premchand deliberately underscores this inversion of values: moral responsibility is replaced by religious fear. The Brahmin does not ask how Dukhi died; he worries how to dispose of him without polluting himself. The act of tying a rope around Dukhi's corpse and dragging it away is profoundly symbolic. It strips the body of individuality and dignity. Dragging is an act typically associated with animals or inanimate objects, not human beings. The refusal to touch Dukhi even in death confirms that caste discrimination extends beyond life itself. Death, which might otherwise function as a universal equalizer, fails to grant Dukhi equality. Instead, it intensifies his dehumanization. His body becomes a problem to be managed, a contaminant to be removed.

The dragging of the corpse also serves as a powerful metaphor for the historical experience of Dalit communities. Just as Dukhi's lifeless body is pulled across the ground, Dalit existence has been dragged through centuries of humiliation, exclusion, and forced labor. The rope signifies the invisible bonds of caste that constrain and degrade. Even in death, Dukhi cannot escape the social script assigned to him. His humanity is erased not only physically but symbolically. Premchand's realism

intensifies the scene's emotional impact. He does not romanticize Dukhi's suffering, nor does he introduce dramatic rebellion or divine justice. There is no moment of awakening, no confrontation that disrupts the social order. Instead, the narrative concludes in unsettling quietness. The Brahmin resumes his life. The system remains intact. Dukhi's death changes nothing.

This absence of redemptive closure is crucial. It compels readers to confront the stark reality of caste oppression without the comfort of resolution. Dukhi's body becomes silent testimony—a witness to systemic injustice that speaks through its degradation. Yet it cannot resist. It cannot protest. It cannot transform its condition. Premchand presents death not as liberation but as ultimate erasure. Dukhi's humanity is denied in life through exploitation and in death through objectification. The body that once labored is reduced to refuse. Through this harrowing depiction, Premchand forces readers into moral discomfort, revealing how caste dehumanizes so completely that even a corpse cannot command dignity.

Unlike the slow exhaustion in *Sadgati*, violence in *Draupadi* is immediate and brutal. Upon capture, Dopdi is subjected to custodial torture and gang rape. Her body is beaten, stripped, and repeatedly violated through the night. The assault is systematic, authorized by officers who intend to “break” her spirit. Here, the body becomes a battlefield. The state attempts to assert control by invading her physical integrity. Sexual violence operates as a political weapon—intended to shame, silence, and destroy resistance. Dopdi's bleeding body represents the extreme vulnerability of marginalized women in militarized zones. Yet, the narrative turns dramatically in its final scene. Ordered to dress before appearing before Senanayak, Dopdi refuses. She walks naked, wounded, and unashamed toward the officer. Her body – bruised and violated – is no longer an object of shame but a weapon of confrontation. She laughs. She questions. She stands upright.

Her nakedness destabilizes the male gaze. The officer, who expected submission, confronts a body that refuses to be covered, disciplined, or silenced. At that moment, power shifts. The violated body becomes a defiant presence. “Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid.” (Devi 6)

Unlike Dukhi's corpse dragged away in humiliation, Dopdi's living body resists humiliation. She transforms imposed nakedness into chosen exposure. The very site of violence becomes the site of rebellion. In both *Sadgati* by Premchand and *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi, violence is not abstract, it is written directly onto the human body. The body becomes the surface upon which power proves itself.

In *Sadgati*, Dukhi's body is shaped and disciplined by caste hierarchy. He does not merely suffer poverty; he suffers ritualized humiliation. His body must bend, sweat, and exhaust itself in unpaid labor simply to secure a priest's favor. Caste determines where he stands, what he touches, what he eats, and even how he dies. When Dukhi collapses, his death does not restore dignity to his body. Instead, it becomes an object of anxiety—handled not with grief but with fear of pollution. The religious order inscribes its authority onto him so completely that even in death he is denied humanity. His body is controlled through everyday customs so normalized that no one pauses to question them.

In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mehen's body is disciplined through the machinery of the postcolonial state. Surveillance, arrest, torture, and rape become instruments of military authority. Unlike Dukhi's slow erosion through labor, Dopdi experiences spectacular, deliberate brutality meant to break resistance and spread terror. Her body becomes a battlefield where the state asserts dominance. Yet in a powerful reversal, Dopdi reclaims her violated body as a site of defiance, refusing shame and refusing to clothe herself. In both texts, the body is the first and final target of oppression. However, Premchand portrays structural, normalized violence—quiet, grinding, embedded in daily life—while Mahasweta Devi exposes visible, state-sponsored brutality meant to intimidate. One kills slowly through custom; the other wounds violently through force. Together, they reveal how power sustains itself by mastering the most vulnerable human site: the body itself.

Dukhi never speaks against the system. His body expresses suffering but not revolt. His silence reflects the crushing internalization of caste inferiority. The narrative evokes sympathy and moral outrage but ends with tragic inevitability.

Dopdi, however, uses silence strategically. She does not plead. She does not beg. Her refusal to clothe herself becomes speech. Her body articulates what words cannot. It declares: *You cannot shame me.*

This difference signals a shift in literary imagination—from portraying subaltern victimhood to envisioning subaltern resistance.

In *Draupadi*, gender functions as a decisive category that intensifies corporeal vulnerability beyond the forms of violence represented in *Sadgati*. Whereas Dukhi's suffering in Premchand's narrative emerges primarily from caste-based extraction of labor, Dopdi Mejhen's subjection is produced at the intersection of tribal identity, class dispossession, and female sexuality. Her body is not only exploited within an economic framework; it is transformed into a symbolic and political battlefield upon which the state seeks to extinguish insurgency and reassert patriarchal authority.

Dopdi's position as a Santhal tribal woman situates her outside the normative structures of social protection and recognition. Tribal identity renders her legible to the state as marginal and expendable, while her class location among the rural poor exposes her to intensified surveillance and coercion. However, it is gender that consolidates these vulnerabilities into a specific mode of violence. The female body, culturally coded as the bearer of honor, becomes the strategic target through which state power attempts to discipline rebellion. Sexual assault in the narrative is therefore not incidental but instrumental - deployed as a calculated technique of domination. The underlying assumption is that rape will produce submission, that shame will neutralize dissent, and that bodily violation will dissolve political agency. The narrative, however, subverts this logic of power. Dopdi's refusal to clothe herself following the assault constitutes a radical re-signification of the violated body. By rejecting imposed shame, she destabilizes the symbolic economy through which sexual violence operates. The expectation of compliance is replaced by confrontation; the spectacle of humiliation is transformed into an act of defiance. Her nakedness ceases to signify dishonor and instead becomes an indictment of militarized patriarchy. In this moment, the body that was intended to be subdued becomes resistant and uncontainable.

By contrast, Premchand's representation of Dukhi remains within a tragic realist paradigm. Dukhi's body registers the cumulative, normalized brutality of caste hierarchy—an everyday violence that culminates in annihilation rather than revolt. While *Sadgati* offers a powerful critique of Brahmanical oppression, it does not envision the oppressed body as an agent of overt resistance.

The representation of bodily violence and resistance differs significantly in *Draupadi* and *Sadgati*, revealing contrasting ideological and historical perspectives. In Premchand's narrative, Dukhi's body becomes the site of slow, normalized violence embedded within the caste hierarchy. His physical exhaustion, hunger, and eventual death reflect a system that disciplines the Dalit body through ritual obligation and unpaid labor. The violence inflicted upon him is structural and quotidian; it operates through customs that appear ordinary yet systematically dehumanize. Dukhi's body ultimately signifies annihilation—its collapse exposes the cruelty of caste oppression but does not culminate in open resistance. The narrative perspective remains tragic and realist, foregrounding suffering to evoke moral critique rather than insurgent defiance. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi constructs Dopdi's body as a terrain of spectacular, state-sponsored brutality. Subjected to custodial torture and sexual assault, her body is targeted not only to punish but to terrorize and silence political dissent. However, unlike Dukhi's fatal submission to systemic violence, Dopdi's violated body becomes the source of radical resistance. Her refusal to clothe herself destabilizes the symbolic logic of shame and transforms vulnerability into confrontation. Here, violence does not end in erasure; it generates a counter-gesture that unsettles authority. Thus, while Dukhi's body reflects the crushing continuity of caste-based oppression, Dopdi's body embodies insurgency against militarized patriarchy. The difference in perspective lies in the movement from exposure to defiance: Premchand emphasizes the tragic consequences of hierarchical violence, whereas Mahasweta Devi imagines the wounded body as capable of political rupture. Together, the two texts trace a shift in literary imagination—from portraying the marginalized body as silenced by power to envisioning it as an active site of resistance.

Read together, the two texts mark a significant shift in literary imagination. Dukhi's body symbolizes the fatal consequences of entrenched social hierarchy; Dopdi's body signifies insurgent resistance against state power. This transition reflects broader historical transformations—from colonial rural oppression embedded in caste custom to postcolonial contexts shaped by revolutionary politics and militarized repression - thereby redefining the political possibilities of the marginalized body in Indian literature.

The study underscores that in both *Sadgati* and *Draupadi*, the body functions not merely as a narrative detail but as the central arena in which power is exercised and contested. By focusing on Dukhi and Dopdi Mejhen, Premchand and Mahasweta Devi illuminate how systems of caste and state authority translate ideological dominance into physical suffering. Violence in these texts is neither incidental nor symbolic alone; it is materially inscribed upon marginalized bodies, revealing the embodied realities of subaltern existence.

However, the two narratives diverge significantly in their imaginative resolution of such violence. In *Sadgati*, the Dalit body becomes emblematic of structural entrapment. Dukhi's exhaustion and death expose the normalized cruelty of caste hierarchy, yet the narrative remains within a tragic realist framework where oppression culminates in annihilation rather than revolt. The critique is powerful but ethically contemplative, compelling recognition of injustice without envisioning overt resistance.

By contrast, *Draupadi* reconfigures the violated body as a site of political rupture. Dopdi's experience of custodial torture and sexual assault reflects the coercive force of militarized nationalism; yet her refusal to submit to shame destabilizes the very logic of that violence. Here, the body does not signify defeat but defiance. Mahasweta Devi thus advances a radical feminist rearticulation of corporeality, wherein suffering becomes the ground for insurgent agency.

Read together, these texts map an important shift in Indian literary discourse—from representing the marginalized body as crushed by entrenched hierarchy to imagining it as capable of unsettling and confronting power. The body emerges, therefore, as both the primary target of domination and a potent medium of resistance, affirming its centrality in articulating histories of violence and possibilities of transformation.

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