

Subaltern Can Speak and Resist : A study of Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and Dhouli

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ABSTRACT

The status of women specially the tribal women ,in dominant patriarchy is very low .They are marginalized and exploited in various ways . A dedicated social activist ,Mahasweta Devi is concerned with the betterment of subaltern people . Her writing depict the struggle for endurance of subaltern women to overcome the oppression and violence brought by the privileged sections of the society by the politics of gender, caste and class . In *Draupadi* , Draupadi is a tribal woman who is subjected to brutal torture and gang rape . *Dhouli* is subjected to dehumanization and she is considered as an outcast . Both of the protagonists have been presented as subaltern and their struggle in the elite society . Both of them can really speak and put resistance in their own way to shake the conscience of the so called high caste and class in society.

Keywords

Patriarchy , Subaltern , Violence , Resistance , Conscience

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Introduction

The term 'Subaltern' was first deployed as a critical term by the Italian Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci . He used the term to refer to the non elite classes or the working classes . It is a British word (military term) for someone " of inferior rank " and combines the Latin words -

Sub (" next below ") + alternus (" every other ") . " Subalten " denotes subordinate position in terms of class , gender , caste , race and culture . Subaltern studies was an attempt to write history from below . Basically, it deals with socio economics , socio-cultural and historical aspect of the society incorporating the entire people that are subordinate in terms of caste , class , gender , age and in any other way . The term " Subaltern " was popularized by Gyatri chakravorty Spivak in her essay – " Can the Subaltern speak ? " (1985) . She argued that all individuals should be left to speak for themselves . Although she speaks for the colonised , the oppressed , the working class , blacks and the women whose voice has been silenced .

Subalternization is the process through postcolonial nation-state glorifies certain aspects and marginalize certain other aspects . Subalternization in the colonial period meant marginalization of non-white races by European colonial masters . In the postcolonial period , it is found that the dream with which millions of people had participated in the independent movement of India , turned to ashes . The discrimination on the basis of religion , class , gender , and caste identity remained intact and continued with new force and form . Most of the independent Indians were unable to take a fresh breath in the air of free India . Such processes are theoretically termed as ' postcolonial subalternization ' .

In postcolonial age , the marginalization of tribals , minorities and special groups is done by dominant ethnic groups , classes and castes , often with the

active collusion of the newly-independent nation-state . It is a process which P . K . Nayar termed as " continuing colonialism " . When the minorities have their laws modified by the majority , when corporate and economic control rests with a select ethnic group , we see " continuing colonialism " (or subalternization) at work . In postcolonial society , the subaltern groups rarely enjoy the benefits of independence .

As an activist , Mahasweta Devi had a first hand experience of the lifestyle of the tribal areas of India . This gave the opportunity to watch and study them clearly . Deeply moved by the unspeakable misery of the marginalized women she actively took part and led them to fight against exploitation , violence and injustice . Her writing proves to be a powerful tool to subvert the authority of upper caste in society . She presents tribal women as subaltern as they are the victims of manifold subjugations and oppressions in the caste-ridden and gender biased society . All along , they are exploited for material purpose , even their female body can not escape this bitter truth.

The female protagonists in the texts of Mahasweta Devi can speak and point out their surging struggle to survive and resist their exploitation by dominant class in the society.

This paper highlights how the female protagonists in *Draupadi* and *Dhouli* struggle and resist against their exploitation by the so called dominant class in the society.

Draupadi is a short story taken from *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi . The story deals manifold oppressions of tribal women social , political , economical and sexual oppression . The protagonist , Dopdi Mejhen , is a tribal revolutionary . She along with her husband , Dulna joins the Naxalite Movement . Through , she is illiterate she leads the movement . She attacks Surja Sahu's house with her husband and comrades because Surja Sahu arranged to dig two tube wells and three wells within

the compound of his two houses but there was draught in Birbhum. They killed Surja Sahu. Besides, they murdered a number of landlords and attacked several police station. Dopdi, along with her husband, Dulna is on the list of most wanted criminals in West Bengal. Dulna is brutally killed by police. Since then, Dopdi is the most wanted criminal to the state. She has created a terror among police and military authorities who are now trying to arrest her by hook or crook. In the epic *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi is married to five husbands. Her legitimized pluralisation in singularity shows the subjugation of women. But in Devi's short story *Draupadi*, she is Dopdi, a tribal woman. She is subjected to double subalternization for her Caste and gender.

Dopdi gets trapped into a situation with the tactics of the army officer, senanayak.

She does not utter a word even after cross interrogation of an hour. The Senanayak commands the soldiers – "Make her. Do the needful". (Devi - 444) Finally, apprehended by the army she is brutally tortured and gang raped and mutilated by the lustful men -

"Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it" (Devi - 467)

But Surprisingly enough, Dopdi behaved in a strange manner in the next morning. She protests in her own way. She does not remain silent. She refuses to put on her cloths. She tears them into pieces. She bleeds, still she is determined. She walks naked towards the Senanayak. Now the senanayak can't cover marks of violence inflicted upon Dopdi. He becomes powerless in front of naked Dopdi who says -

"What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man?" (Devi - 507-508)

She is not ashamed of being naked -

"There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed." (Devi - 501)

Later she challenges him to counter her. Through her nakedness Dopdi protests in her own way -

"Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Sananayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid".

(Devi 514-516)

Dhouli is a short story taken from *Outcast: Four stories* by Mahasweta Devi. The story deals with a tribal (Dusad) woman named Dhouli who is subjected to Subalternization in respect of class, caste and gender. But she speaks and struggles in her own way to survive. The dusads are deprived of leading a regular life -

"what does Dhouli expect? She is a dusad, an untouchable; did she expect a house or land?"

Dhouli is a bonded labourer. She is unable to feed herself properly. She is deceived by Misrilal, an upper Caste Hindu. As she is a dusad she can not express her love for Misrilal. He molests her but she can do nothing -

"what can I do? Nothing. Deotas like you always get what you want! Go ahead, take me, dishonour me." (Devi -10)

She bears Misrilal's son. But he refuses to accept her as his wife.

Finding no other alternative, Dhouli chooses to be a prostitute. But Misrilal conspires against her and makes an argument to drive her out for the village -

"Dhouli can not practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi and do her working there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burned to death. Such sinful activities can not continue in the heart of this village. This village still has Brahmans living in it".

So, now she is an outcast. She decides to be a prostitute freely to lead her and her son's livelihood. She comprehends the reality -

"How simple to sell one's body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, maroa. If she had known it was that easy, she would have done it much earlier. Her son too would have been well fed, healthy."

(Devi - 18)

Now, she is emancipated from all kind of oppressions and exploitations. She is determined with the unconquerable will power. She proves that women, who are socially and economically discriminated and deprived of the mainstream society, also can lead a regular life. Misrilal asks her why she has not committed suicide. Dhouli replies boldly -

"I tried to Kill myself. But then I thought why should I? You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself? Why? Why? Why?" - (Devi - 31)

Dhouli is a representative of the marginalized socially, politically and economically, who are deprived of their right. They are considered as untouchables by so called privileged section of the society. This shows the higher caste and classes of the society. This incurable malady still survives today but this must cease to exist and they must be protected and paid their due respect.

Conclusion -

Though the civilization has entered into the Cyber Age, the attitude of the society (dominant classes or groups) towards the subaltern has not been changed and the myth of the "equal right" has become a cry in the wilderness. The stories *Draupadi* and *Dhouli* represent the experiences of subaltern women. Mahasweta Devi has aptly represented the politics of caste, class and gender. Both the protagonists can speak and resist in their own way. They do not remain silent. They form a resistance through female body. They can dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy after a long term suffering and sacrifice. Thus, Mahasweta Devi has become successful to give voice to the voiceless marginalized women and put resistance against the exploitation.

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