

Subaltern Defiance in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*: A Re-assessment of Political Vision

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Abstract—Mahasweta Devi is one of the most distinguished writers of India. She writes a large number of plays, short stories and novels. In her writings she portrays women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste. She writes on the rights of the marginalized and the empowerment of women. This paper examines Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* as a powerful literary and political statement that redefines resistance through the figure of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman caught in the violence of state oppression. This article attempts to evaluate the resistance to the ethnic and gender subalternity portrayed by Mahasweta Devi's story *Draupadi*. By portraying Dopdi's journey from a hunted rebel to a fearless symbol of defiance, Devi exposes the complex intersections of gender, caste, class, and political power in contemporary India. The analysis highlights how Dopdi's violated body becomes both a target of patriarchal and military brutality and, ultimately, a site of radical empowerment when she refuses to submit to her oppressors. Through feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the article reassesses Devi's political vision, revealing her commitment to giving voice to the subaltern and challenging dominant structures of authority. *Draupadi* thus emerges not only as a critique of systemic violence but also as a transformative narrative that asserts the agency, dignity, and resistance of marginalized women.

Index Terms—Political, Subaltern, Tribal Women, Violence, Patriarchal, Empowerment, Post-colonial Perspective, Marginalized.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi stands as one of India's most influential literary figures, known not only for her powerful storytelling but also for her unwavering commitment to social justice. As a writer and activist, she dedicated her life to documenting the struggles of Adivasis, Dalits, landless labourers, and other marginalized communities who remain invisible in

mainstream narratives. Her works blend literary artistry with political urgency, giving voice to those silenced by systemic oppression and exposing the brutal realities of exploitation, displacement, and state violence. Mahasweta Devi is the most distinguished social activist among the contemporary Bengali artists who wrote mainly to expose the deceitfulness of the democratic set up of the country and to focus the untold miseries of the women in society. She writes mainly in Bengali but most of her works has been translated for the greater understanding of the masses. Her works are dedicated to highlighting the suffering of those individuals who are pushed to the periphery of the society and are forgotten as part of humanity. Devi's literary work exposes the legacy of violence that has been passed on into the lives of generations of women. Her works portray women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste. She writes on the rights of the marginalized and the empowerment of women. Devi through her characters tries to show that woman do not only speak from a position of marginalization but also from a position of resistance/power. She has to her credit several plays, more than twenty collections of short stories and around one hundred novels in Bengali. 'Draupadi' is one of the courageous narratives by Mahasweta Devi, where her revolutionary passion captures the experiences of a subaltern woman within the context of the Naxalite Movement that took place in 1967 in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal. *Draupadi* is Mahasweta Devi's main protagonist. Her name Draupadi or Dopdi is given by her upper caste mistress. Among her many groundbreaking writings, *Draupadi* emerges as one of her most compelling and politically charged stories, acclaimed for its bold portrayal of resistance through the character of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman targeted during the Naxalite

movement. The story holds a central place in Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre because it challenges dominant structures of authority while foregrounding the lived experiences of subaltern women. *Draupadi* not only confronts the violence inflicted on marginalized bodies but also transforms that violence into a powerful act of defiance. This article focuses on exploring how Dopdi becomes a symbol of resistance—how her refusal to submit, even after extreme brutality, redefines power in a context marked by exploitation and militarized control. Through an in-depth reading of the text, the study aims to reassess Mahasweta Devi's political vision, highlighting her portrayal of resistance as both a personal assertion of dignity and a broader critique of state power and patriarchal dominance. The concept of the subaltern was first introduced by Gramsci to describe groups excluded from the hegemonic power of the ruling classes. In the context of South Asian historiography, this term was adopted by Ranajit Guha and others in the Subaltern Studies collective to critique colonial and nationalist historiographies that neglected peasant insurgency and popular resistance.

Mahasweta Devi's Political Vision:

Mahasweta Devi's political vision is deeply rooted in her lifelong commitment to representing the voices of those who exist on the margins of Indian society—tribal communities, women, landless labourers, and the oppressed. Her writing draws from extensive fieldwork among Adivasi groups and reflects her profound engagement with their struggles for dignity, land rights, and survival. Through her fiction and activism, she sought not merely to depict their hardships but to expose the systemic structures that perpetuate exploitation, ensuring that their stories demand national attention. For Mahasweta Devi, literature was never separated from activism. She believed that writing could act as a powerful instrument of protest, capable of challenging dominant narratives and unsettling the conscience of the reader. Her works serve as a form of testimony against social injustices, offering a voice to the silenced and transforming storytelling into a political act. Whether portraying bonded labourers, tribal revolutionaries, or oppressed women, she consistently used her narratives to critique political corruption, class hierarchy, and gendered violence. Themes of exploitation, state brutality, and social

inequality recur throughout her literary corpus. She repeatedly exposed how the machinery of the state—its police, military, and bureaucratic institutions—functions to control and suppress marginalized groups. Her stories bring attention to the violence inflicted on vulnerable bodies, not as isolated incidents, but as manifestations of systemic oppression. Through sharp realism and deeply empathetic characterization, Mahasweta Devi reveals the human cost of political power. Within this larger framework, *Draupadi* occupies a significant place. The story encapsulates her political concerns by portraying the state's violent suppression of tribal insurgency, while simultaneously highlighting the strength and agency of a tribal woman who refuses to be defeated. Dopdi's defiance becomes a powerful embodiment of Mahasweta Devi's vision—one where the oppressed rise against injustice, asserting their humanity despite overwhelming odds. In this way, *Draupadi* perfectly aligns with Devi's broader political and literary agenda, using fiction as a means to confront harsh realities and inspire resistance.

Overview of the Story *Draupadi*:

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is set against the turbulent backdrop of the Naxalite movement, a period marked by armed rebellion, state surveillance, and widespread conflicts between tribal communities and government forces. The story follows Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman and a grassroots rebel who, along with her husband, has been actively resisting the oppressive structures that exploit tribal lands and labour. After a series of crackdowns on insurgent groups, Dopdi is identified as a key dissident and becomes a prime target for the military authorities. Dopdi's eventual capture by government forces marks a turning point in the narrative. She is arrested, interrogated, and brutally tortured, with rape used as a weapon to break her spirit and force compliance. However, instead of submitting, Dopdi transforms her violated body into a site of powerful resistance. When ordered to dress and present herself before the authorities, she defiantly refuses, standing naked before Senanayak—the officer leading the operation—and asserting a fierce, unshakeable agency that undermines the entire machinery of power arrayed against her. The two central characters symbolically embody opposing forces. Dopdi Mejhen represents the subaltern rebel—a woman who

endures immense suffering yet refuses to relinquish her dignity or agency. Senanayak, on the other hand, is portrayed as the rational, modern representative of state authority. He views Dopdi as an “object” to be subdued, a problem to be solved, reflecting the dehumanizing attitude of the state toward the marginalized. Their confrontation becomes a dramatic representation of resistance versus oppression. The political and social environment of *Draupadi* is charged with tension, conflict, and deep-seated inequality. Mahasweta Devi depicts a world where the state relies on coercion, surveillance, and violence to maintain control, especially over tribal communities who resist exploitation. The story exposes the stark contrast between bureaucratic rationality and lived human suffering, revealing a society in which the marginalized are systematically silenced. Yet it is precisely within this oppressive landscape that Dopdi’s final act of defiance emerges as a powerful, transformative resistance, challenging the political structures that seek to destroy her.

II. DRAUPADI/DOPDI AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

Body as a Site of Violence:

In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi powerfully demonstrates how the female body becomes a central site of political oppression, especially in contexts where the state seeks to control and silence marginalized groups. Dopdi Mejhen’s body is not merely a physical entity—it becomes a battlefield upon which the forces of state power attempt to assert dominance. As a tribal woman and a rebel associated with the Naxalite movement, Dopdi is seen by the authorities not as an individual but as a symbol of insurgency that must be subdued. Her arrest and the subsequent violence inflicted upon her expose how the state weaponizes the female body to crush dissent. Rape, in this narrative, functions deliberately as a political tool. The state forces do not violate Dopdi out of personal desire; instead, they use sexual violence strategically to humiliate, degrade, and break her sense of identity and resistance. By turning her body into an object of brutality, the military attempts to send a clear message: rebellion will be punished through dehumanization. This systemic use of rape reveals the intersection of patriarchy and political authority, where women’s bodies become

instruments of punishment and control. However, Mahasweta Devi does not allow this violence to define Dopdi. Instead, the narrative transforms the very site of oppression into the foundation of extraordinary resistance, challenging the power structures that seek to silence her.

Body as a Weapon of Defiance:

Dopdi’s most striking act of resistance emerges when she refuses to clothe herself after enduring brutal sexual violence. Instead of accepting the shame intended to silence her, she stands naked before Senanayak and his men, transforming her body from a site of victimhood into a powerful instrument of defiance. Her refusal to be covered is deliberate—it asserts autonomy over her own body and denies the oppressors the satisfaction of seeing her broken or subdued. In this moment, Dopdi rejects the imposed shame and reclaims control over what was meant to be a symbol of her defeat. Through this bold stance, Dopdi turns humiliation into empowerment. The violence inflicted upon her, meant to strip away her dignity, instead becomes the catalyst for a deeper, more radical form of resistance. By confronting the men without fear or submission, she exposes their cruelty and reveals the moral bankruptcy of the system they represent. Her nakedness—far from signifying vulnerability—becomes a weapon that unsettles and destabilizes her oppressors. Senanayak, who expects obedience and remorse, finds himself unable to face her unwavering gaze and fearless posture. In this reversal of power dynamics, Dopdi stands as the true authority, while the armed men who violated her become uncomfortable and powerless. Her defiance disrupts the hierarchical structure upon which state violence relies, demonstrating that physical domination does not guarantee psychological or moral control. By refusing to conform to the expected role of a victim, Dopdi reclaims her agency and turns the tools of oppression back onto the oppressors. In doing so, she embodies a radical form of resistance that challenges and overthrows the very foundations of power that sought to destroy her.

Transformation from Victim to Resistor:

Dopdi’s transformation from victim to resistor marks the emotional and political core of Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*. Despite being subjected to inhuman

torture, she refuses to accept the role of a submissive, defeated woman. Her resistance is not expressed through physical power but through a fierce, unyielding assertion of selfhood that challenges the very foundations of patriarchal and military authority. By standing defiantly before her oppressors, Dopdi demonstrates that her spirit remains unbroken, even when her body has been brutalized. This refusal to submit is a profound act of rebellion, revealing her inner strength and unwavering agency. In confronting those who sought to destroy her, Dopdi stands against two intertwined systems of power: patriarchy and militarized state authority. The soldiers expect silence, shame, and compliance as the natural aftermath of their violence. Instead, Dopdi's fearless resistance exposes their cruelty and incapacity to dominate her. She redefines the relationship between oppressor and oppressed by denying the military the emotional control they assume rape will guarantee. Her act becomes a direct challenge to the structures that rely on gendered violence as a tool of suppression, thereby undermining both their authority and their ideology. The symbolic meaning of Dopdi's final confrontation is profound and transformative. Her naked, defiant stance becomes a declaration of autonomy, a refusal to be erased or diminished. It symbolizes the reclaiming of her identity and dignity in the face of overwhelming brutality. By forcing Senanayak to look at her without the possibility of hiding behind bureaucratic detachment, she exposes the moral failure of the state he represents. Her confrontation becomes a moment of truth—one that shifts the narrative from her suffering to her strength. In this climactic act of resistance, Dopdi ceases to be a victim and emerges as a powerful symbol of defiance, embodying the indestructible will of the oppressed to challenge and resist injustice.

Themes of State Power and Subaltern Agency:

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* offers a sharp and unflinching depiction of the dynamics between state power and subaltern agency. At the centre of this portrayal stands Senanayak, the cold and calculating representative of state authority. As a military officer entrusted with suppressing insurgency, Senanayak embodies the rational, bureaucratic mindset of the state. He views Dopdi and other tribal rebels not as human beings but as "problems" to be eliminated. His methods—tracking, capturing, and authorizing

violence—reveal how the state dehumanizes those who challenge its authority. Senanayak's character symbolizes the system's reliance on force and coercion to maintain control, even at the cost of moral integrity. Against this oppressive power structure stands the remarkable resilience of the subaltern, represented by Dopdi. While the state relies on physical strength, weapons, and institutional authority, Dopdi's resistance emerges from her inner strength, dignity, and refusal to surrender. This creates a powerful contrast: the state possesses material power but lacks moral substance, while the subaltern possess no weapons but command an unbreakable will. Through Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi highlights the agency of marginalized individuals who, despite being stripped of rights and voice, continue to resist oppression in profound and unexpected ways. Dopdi's final act of defiance becomes a direct exposure of the hypocrisy and brutality within the system. The military's claim of restoring order and justice collapses when faced with the reality of their own violence. By standing naked and unafraid before Senanayak, Dopdi forces him—and by extension, the state—to confront the consequences of their actions. His inability to face her defiance reveals the fragility of a system built on the illusion of dominance. Dopdi's resistance disrupts the hierarchical structure that privileges authority over humanity, exposing a state that preaches order yet practices cruelty. In this confrontation, the subaltern emerges not as powerless, but as a transformative force capable of challenging and unsettling entrenched power.

Feminist and Postcolonial Interpretation:

A feminist interpretation of *Draupadi* foregrounds the ways in which women's bodies are controlled, violated, and politicized within patriarchal structures. Dopdi's experience exposes how gendered violence is used not only to punish women but also to assert dominance over entire communities. Her body becomes a site where state power attempts to impose silence and submission. Yet, her refusal to accept shame and her bold assertion of agency challenge the expectation that women must remain victims. By transforming the imposed violence into a weapon of defiance, Dopdi embodies a radical form of female agency that disrupts patriarchal control and reveals the strength inherent in reclaiming one's voice and

autonomy. From a postcolonial perspective, *Draupadi* highlights the struggles of tribal communities who have been historically marginalized by dominant social, political, and cultural forces. Dopdi's identity as a Santhal woman is crucial, as her resistance becomes symbolic of the broader fight against hegemonic power that exploits tribal lands, erases indigenous cultures, and criminalizes collective dissent. The state, represented by Senanayak and his forces, operates as a colonial-like authority that seeks to discipline and suppress tribal populations through force. Dopdi's rebellion, therefore, represents a powerful assertion of tribal dignity and resistance in the face of systematic domination. Mahasweta Devi's narrative also draws attention to the intersections of gender, class, caste, and ethnicity that shape Dopdi's oppression. As a tribal woman, she occupies one of the most vulnerable positions in society—marginalized not only as a woman but also as a member of a lower socio-economic and ethnic group. Her exploitation cannot be understood through gender alone; it reflects overlapping structures of discrimination that target her because of who she is and where she comes from. At the same time, her resistance speaks to the collective strength of those at the margins, revealing how layered identities can become powerful sites of defiance. Together, the feminist and postcolonial readings illuminate *Draupadi* as a complex narrative that challenges multiple forms of domination while celebrating the resilience of the oppressed.

Reassessing Mahasweta Devi's Political Vision:
 Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* stands as a powerful testament to her deep political commitment to exposing injustice and amplifying the struggles of the marginalized. Through the character of Dopdi, Devi highlights the brutal realities faced by tribal communities and presents their resistance as a legitimate and necessary response to systemic oppression. The story reflects Devi's view that literature must confront uncomfortable truths and serve as a catalyst for social awareness. Her depiction of Dopdi's transformation—from a hunted rebel to a fearless symbol of defiance—reveals her unwavering belief in the resilience and dignity of the oppressed. In Devi's political vision, resistance is not limited to individual acts of bravery but is deeply rooted in collective struggle. While Dopdi's final gesture of

defiance is intensely personal, it also embodies the collective pain, anger, and resistance of tribal communities who have long been subjected to exploitation and violence. Through Dopdi, Devi illustrates how the oppressed can claim power even in the most dehumanizing circumstances. The narrative insists that resistance is not just a political act but also a reclaiming of humanity, identity, and voice. In doing so, Devi reiterates that the subalterns are not passive victims but active agents capable of challenging dominant power structures. The story also serves as a sharp critique of the state and its mechanisms of control. The calculated violence inflicted on Dopdi reveals the state's hypocrisy—while claiming to uphold law and order, it resorts to brutality and dehumanization to suppress dissent. Devi exposes the contradictions within these social and political structures, showing how those entrusted with maintaining justice often become perpetrators of oppression. *Draupadi* compels readers to question the morality of institutions that rely on coercion and to recognize the systemic injustices faced by marginalized groups. Mahasweta Devi's political vision remains profoundly relevant in today's socio-political context. Issues of state violence, gendered oppression, tribal displacement, and the silencing of dissent continue to echo across contemporary society. Dopdi's defiance resonates as a reminder that marginalized communities still fight for their rights and recognition. Through *Draupadi*, Devi challenges us to reassess modern systems of power and to acknowledge the ongoing struggles for justice. Her work endures as a call to remain vigilant, empathetic, and committed to resisting oppression in all its forms.

III. CONCLUSION

Dopdi's journey in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* traces a powerful transformation from a persecuted rebel to an unyielding symbol of defiance. Through her refusal to submit to the violence inflicted upon her, Dopdi reclaims agency over her own body and identity, ultimately confronting the structures that seek to silence her. In conclusion, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* possess a universal and enduring appeal that transcends geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. These narratives resonate deeply with readers from diverse backgrounds for several compelling reasons. Devi's storytelling brilliance,

characterized by vivid characters, timeless themes, and a deep exploration of the human experience, invites readers into a world that is simultaneously specific to India and universally relatable. The stories tap into fundamental human emotions, such as love, suffering, resilience, and the desire for justice, fostering a sense of shared humanity among readers worldwide. The universal relevance of the themes within "Breast Stories," including social justice, gender equality, resistance against oppression, and the complexities of identity, speaks to the global concerns of our time. These narratives encourage self-reflection, challenge stereotypes, and inspire empathy, compelling readers to consider the social injustices and inequalities that persist not only in India but in societies around the world. Devi's stories serve as a potent catalyst for discussions and actions aimed at addressing social issues and advocating for positive change. They motivate readers to become advocates for social justice, fostering a broader global conversation about human rights and equity. Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Stories" stand as a testament to the enduring power of literature to transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Her final act of resistance—standing naked and fearless before her oppressors—signals a profound shift in power, demonstrating that the human spirit can remain unconquered even in the face of the state's most brutal tactics. Dopdi's evolution embodies the resilience and strength of the marginalized, presenting resistance not as an act of physical force but as a powerful assertion of dignity and truth. Mahasweta Devi uses Dopdi's character to expose the deep injustices embedded within political and social systems. Through vivid storytelling and unflinching realism, she reveals the cruelty and hypocrisy of state violence while giving voice to those who are often unheard and unseen. Devi's narrative confronts entrenched hierarchies of gender, caste, ethnicity, and class, demonstrating how these intersecting forces target the vulnerable. At the same time, she illustrates how resistance emerges from these very margins, disrupting oppressive structures and forcing them to reckon with their own moral failures. Ultimately, *Draupadi* stands as a timeless text that redefines resistance and challenges power in its most oppressive forms. Dopdi's defiance transcends the immediate context of the story and resonates as a universal symbol of courage, agency,

and subaltern strength. As a work of political and literary significance, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* continues to inspire readers to question authority, confront injustice, and celebrate the indestructible spirit of those who resist oppression.

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