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Plight of the Subaltern woman in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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ABSTRACT

Europeans identify them with 'Eurocentrism' and observe themselves as dominant and superior, and their colonized land as inferior to them. The colonizers are concerned about the possibility of being contaminated by the interaction with the colonized people and have always been frightened of this interaction, thereby leaving behind their supremacy and power over the colonized, consequently, the colonizers consider the interaction as a menace and disguised their fear. This study examines Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" which reflects the Subaltern concept which is one of the significant concepts of Postcolonialism. It was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985). The status of women in the society, predominantly marginalized is engrossed with the sense of negligence. These marginalized women are suffering in terms of their gender, class and caste discrimination. These women are not provided any authority with regard to their own self and existing. The marginalized women live on the edge of the domination and anguish. This paper persistently attempts to re-examine the marginalization of the tribal woman with reference to Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", which is a metanarrative, capturing the life and times of its protagonist Dopdi Majhen, a Santhal tribal, at the intersection of modern developmental state and subsistent subaltern survival. It raises the issues of class, caste and colonialism, and their collusion in the formation of hegemonic patriarchal nation state and how this mainstream formation maintains itself through violent 'othering' of the margins. Mahasweta Devi is one of the contemporary woman writers who deal with the forms of oppression in her works. She is considered as one of the boldest of Bengali female writers whose works are associated with the rural tribal community of West Bengal, women and dalits. Feministic aspect is observed in her works through the sympathetic portrayal of women and their consequent revolt. She exemplifies the sufferings of women, miseries and their power of enduring and resistance. She also deals with the women issues like loneliness, separation, women's fight for survival, exploitative situations like rape, marital violence, death and its loss and female slavery. Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak view Mahasweta Devi's works as rich sites of feminist discourse.

Keywords— Postcolonialism, Eurocentrism, colonizer, colonized land, marginalization, subaltern, hegemonic patriarchal, 'othering' of the margins, feminist discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Most texts provide the definition of colonialism before defining the meaning of the term postcolonialism. Bill Ashcroft states Colonialism as "the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically". Postcolonialism refers to "after colonialism" or "after-independence" (Ashcroft et al. 12) depicting the wide range of social, cultural and political events evolving specifically from the fall of European colonialism that took place after the World War II. Postcolonialism expresses the binary idea of colonialism. Hence, postcolonial literature is upshot of colonialism.

Colonialism commenced in the early 15th century with the Spanish and Portuguese discoveries of continents, but, in the 18th century Europe, the initiation of the Industrial Revolution steered enormous changes in the industrial transformation of economies. To obtain raw materials and goods for their markets, Europeans colonized many non-European countries. Europeans in the name of colonialism targeting the non-European came into contact with the non-European culture and landscape.

Europeans identify them with 'Eurocentrism' and observe themselves as dominant and superior, and their colonized land as inferior to them. Subsequently, they sought to transform the colonized nations into the civilized like their own country. Despite the fact that the Europeans consider themselves superior to the non-European countries, aim to transform this plain into civilized land, the deep understanding and close interaction have always been resulted in a deep fear for the colonizers.

The colonizers are concerned about the possibility of being contaminated by the interaction with the colonized people and have always been frightened of this interaction, thereby leaving behind their supremacy and power over the colonized, consequently, the colonizers consider the interaction as a menace and disguised their fear. Although the interaction is a threat to the colonizers it had an effect on the colonized that led to the loss of self-esteem and degrading their image among this people. Thus, the suppressed people uprooted themselves and struggle to become a member of another culture. During the colonial period the written texts aid the Europeans in flourishing their supreme power towards the non-Europeans. It is the system of hegemony that determines the representations. As the art of writing is ruled by the Europeans, they describe the colonized people as 'voiceless', 'sensual', 'female', 'despotic', 'irrational', and 'backward'. The colonial discourse never portrayed the sufferings of the colonized non-Europeans. During the colonial period, the Europeans always have cultural, social and economic dominance over the colonized territory. Bill Ashcroft says, the colonizers think themselves as "a high level of civilization", formulated the European colonies in colonial discourse as "civilizations in decay, as manifestations of degenerate societies and races in need of rescue and rehabilitations by a civilized Europe" (Ashcraft 158). The colonizers preferred to take their best of their nation to the colonized land, to transform the native to civilized people.

Bill Ashcraft accentuates that "expressed through a fear amongst the colonizers of going native, namely losing their distinctiveness and superiority of contamination from native practices" (Ashcroft 159). Although the colonizer travelled to the colonized lands to make major changes; however, they themselves risked being transformed by the colonized. The strong interaction with the colonized locales and under the climatic effect of the colonies in hot areas, the colonizer devalued morally and physically, and slipped as Ashcroft claims, "from European behaviour, to the participation in native ceremonies, or the adoption and even enjoyment of local customs in terms of dress, food, recreation and entertainment" (Ashcroft 115). Furthermore, the colonized endured what they always feared; that is they were degraded and contaminated by the native life and customs. Upon teaching the colonized land, the colonizer recognized the difficulty of surviving in that land. However, the colonized people after obtaining their independence, acknowledged the importance of their identity and who learned not to be embarrassed about their culture and past, started to create their own text called postcolonial literature. The prime motive of the Postcolonial text is to abolish the European Eurocentric notions, while the colonized had not the privilege to stop the European domination. They were depicted the same way as illustrated during the colonial period. The colonized land presented the Europeans as 'irrational', 'degenerate', and 'sensual', as they were depicted during the colonial period. Moreover, the colonized people were neglected and suffered for many decades, thus the postcolonial text began to imitate the colonizer.

The significant concepts of postcolonial theory are Discourse, Eurocentric, Foregrounding, Hegemony, Hybridity, Multiculturalism, Intertextuality, Marginality, Mimicry, Subaltern etc. This study examines Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" which reflects the Subaltern concept. Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern', to identify the cultural hegemony that suppressed the people in terms of class, caste, race, and culture. It was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) 'Subaltern', epitomises some of the dominant historiographical perceptions that deconstruct the mainstream to decentre it and provide the historical space with the marginal voice. Colin Mac Cabe in forward to *In Other Worlds* imparts on the expression of gender in Mahasweta Devi's texts: "The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in its grounding in the gendered subaltern's body, in that female body which is never questioned and only exploited. Mahasweta Devi does not treat gender, class and race as analogous narratives; she rather takes them as interpenetrative ones."

The status of women in the society, predominantly marginalized is engrossed with the sense of negligence. These marginalized women are suffering in terms of their gender, class and caste discrimination. These women are not provided any authority with regard to their own self and existing. The marginalized women live on the edge of the domination and anguish.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the contemporary writers who deal with the forms of oppression in her works. Her works do exemplify the minor details of these marginalized women and offer an array of their situation in the society. She rages on the materialistic usage of women body by the patriarchal society for both social and economic reasons. She also deals with the women issues like loneliness, separation, women's fight for survival, exploitative situations like rape, marital violence, death and its loss and female slavery. Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak view Mahasweta Devi's works as rich sites of feminist discourse.

Mahasweta Devi was born in East Bengal and considered as the boldest Bengali female writer whose works are associated with the rural tribal community of West Bengal, women and dalits. She was born in a renowned family with politically captivated artists and scholars of Dhaka. Mahasweta Devi's father was a prominent writer, who was the reason for inspiring and imprinting literary activity in her. She was graduated from Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan School in the year 1946. Later she dedicated herself in political activism particularly in the rural Bengal. She managed to work in different jobs, including teaching. She also wrote many columns and articles for note-worthy journals. She received M.A English literature in 1963 from Calcutta University and pursued as an English professor at a Calcutta college. Her works were encouraged by the affairs of social justice. She worked as a reporter of Bengali Daily Newspaper "The Jugantar". In association with Swami Agniveh she organized the welfare societies to tribal and oppressed people to empower them to fight for their rights. Her sharp and powerful fiction has won her the recognition in the form of Sahitya Academy (1979), Jnanpith (1996) and Ramon Magasaysay (1996). She was awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her activist work amongst the tribal communities. Her writing as an influential tool undermines the authority of upper caste in tribal society, particularly marginalized women's subjugation by society.

In Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi", the protagonist Draupadi Mejhhen (Dopdi), a revolutionary activist. She and her husband Dulna Majhi are the part of Operation Bakuli in 1971. They are wanted by the government and therefore they are hiding in underground. The whole story spins around in search of Dopdi until she gets arrested. The story concludes with a disastrous

scene wherein she becomes miserable victim of the most atrocious and brutal male violence on woman. Two members of their group have betrayed and consequently Dopdi was caught by police.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" encapsulates the life of Dopdi, on connection with modern progressive state and the survival of the subaltern. It raises the issues of class, caste and colonialism, and their collusion in the formation of hegemonic patriarchal nation state and how this mainstream formation maintains itself through violent 'othering' of the margins. The cultural burdens of her own community, the exigencies of naxalites activism, and the onslaught of army and state – Draupadi (Dopdi) summarizes the gendered nature of the process of othering and how the mainstream-margin antagonism uses the female body as a site of dishonour to vindicate patriarchy, its values and norms. Mahasweta Devi defines her modus operandi thus: "It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present times and following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies epic and 'puranas' interesting, I use them with new interpretations" (qtd in. Rohtak 166).

Literature is the amalgamation of imagination and reality. Mahasweta Devi draws Draupadi (Dopdi) character as the representation of epic character Draupadi from *Mahabharata*. In the epic, Draupadi is the wife of five brothers (Pandavas) that gives an idea of only polyandry example in any religious text as Spivak said. The manifestation of Draupadi is only limited in religious rites, but not in reality. Her first husband lost the dice-game and stalked what he owns. Draupadi is one of them as the 'material property' who is to be sold or exchanged. It is also a matter of fact that her presence in their life is not at all important and thus the enemy chief gets the opportunity to strip her. Though, in religious myth he was not able to strip Draupadi completely. The enemy chief is not able to strip her as Krishna plays a miracle; "Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped" (Spivak 183). Her story represents the upper-class story where so-called God is present saving her. However, her status amidst her five husbands conveys the reader a strange idea of her "legitimized pluralization in singularity" (Spivak 183) which is completely limited. Spivak maintains: Mahasweta's story questions this "singularity" by placing Dopdi first in a comradesly, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape (Spivak 183). According to Mahasweta Devi the women is the one who has to bear and not only bear but also have to suffer from suppression. She is both marginalized as a woman as well as a low caste. So, she is "doubly subaltern" if it comes to subaltern women studies, doubly subaltern means concern for the woman who was marginalized as woman as well as she belongs to a lower caste. The themes of her writings have majorly been doubly subaltern. Dopdi Mehjan in "Draupadi" is a major example of doubly subaltern character, as she belongs to the tribal community and she is sexually ill-treated by the custodians of law.

In Dopdi's life, no God can save her. She is brutally gang-raped and leaving carelessly on the floor. She moves ahead naked in front of Senanayak, which makes him uncomfortable. He asks for her clothes, but she denies wearing and said "What's the use of clothes? [...] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed" (Spivak 196). Her naked body represents the power of marginalized that stops Senanayak to move ahead. In myth, lord Krishna helps Draupadi to save where in reality Dopdi is not saved by any lord against male domination. She plays vitally as both marginalized and suppressed woman. Being a woman she becomes an active agent in executing the protest even giving away her 'body'. Similarly, as a subaltern woman, she becomes a surrogate to stand out. It is true that her course of action was instructed by Arijit, the leader of a movement; however, it is she who stands against Senanayak. Portrayal of Dopdi is not only as an activist but also as an agent who asserts her own story that challenges the general thought of Indian history.

Senanayak captures the Dopdi in order to justify the law. He maintains and believes what he taught and pursues his duty without any reluctance. Spivak compares him with Prospero Shakespeare's *Tempest*, who comes to a land and found uncivilized people. And it is his soul's duty to civilize them even by killing them. Dopdi, a Santal woman is considered as marginalized. As Dopdi's activities frighten Senanayak and his government, he executes the hunting mission operation. He willingly wants to participate in so-called civilizing mission because for him it is his duty and only truth to deal with. Spivak remarks, "He follows the necessities and contingencies of what he sees as his historical moment" (Spivak 179) that exemplifies his character clearly. He fabricates his own story from his point of view whereas his counter Dopdi has a different version to express.

Here it is meant that the superior complex of white people who believe that they are the 'only' civilized people in the world and it is their duty to civilize 'others' in rest of the world. Dopdi's position in the story is the position of a marginalized who will never speak or who cannot be spoken. However, she breaks this idea and amplifies her voice. She stops Senanayak and wants him to know the 'unspoken' voices of a woman. Her struggles to become independent or unshackles her country gets a shape while she stands upright in-front of Senanayak and scared him. Mahasweta Devi says, "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (Spivak 196).

Dopdi's ultimate action takes her "in a place where she will finally act *for* herself in *not* 'acting' in challenging the man to (en) counter her as unrecorded or misrecorded objective historical monument" (Spivak 184). She (Dopdi) rewrites the story that tells the story of marginalized woman who instantly turns herself into 'subject: I' from being 'object: her'. Moreover, her body protrudes the perception of materialization of the marginalized women that signifies as resistance. She breaks the traditional belief of womanhood or womanly behaviour and stand against this believe.

Furthermore, her naked-mutilated physical appearance draws a picture of a bold protest of being ashamed because of gang rape. She does not consider any man as a man because she is cruelly gang raped and when Senanayak asks her to get dressed, she objects and then abjects as she is resisting taking the essential needs of human being of being cover up. She totally refuses to become a component of subservient or docile, but proposes herself on a different level. Her abjection of disgrace and hesitation as women unveils her forte. She defies the docility of being poor, tribal and or a woman.

As she rises tenaciously naked before her mongers, Dopdi manages to wield her raped body as a weapon to terrify her enemies. By refusing the disciplining power of shame, Mahasweta Devi's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, claims Draupadi, "terrifying super object". (Spivak 184). The terrific characterisation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts before the readers: the subaltern and oppressed woman can be represented in imaginative writing and she can be represented as an "agent". 'Draupadi' effectively dismantles Spivak's contention in her essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" that "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak 104). In the representation of Dopdi, a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks aloud - literally and metaphorically since her, voice...is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp that makes her audible to the whole world.'

In addition, Mahasweta Devi presents her as the repressive female whose body is mutilated and at the same time becomes a dispute against oppressor. She authorizes the female voice by presenting the female body as dispute of domination and suppression. Dopdi's action is "a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities [...] that has become apparent, at least after a general review of the facts" (Foucault 49) which becomes a repressive response to the superior power. Michel Foucault entitles it as 'instrument- effect' which explicates the reverse form of protest against perversion of supremacy. It also projects that Dopdi's consumed body becomes an instrumental strike back against the suppression of superior authority.

Mahasweta Devi is deeply political, social activist who has been working with and for the tribal's and marginalized communities. Devi remarks:

"I wish for no more sati's, no more dowry deaths, no more honor killings, no more flesh being bought or sold....." All her strong women characters like Jashoda, Dopdi, Dulali, Andi and many more, all have left a very strong impression. She says: "let the downtrodden awake, let the forgotten faces and muffed voices to arise to claim their own.....let my India awaken again and again. It is a big dream, I know, but not an impossible one...."

Thus, portraying the life of exploited women in the novels, and short stories Mahasweta Devi expressed that women should not passive and submissive and should realize their own inner strengths which they possess. They should also be aware of the fact that their own existence is meaningful and should reshape their lives according to the new set perspective of freedom.

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