

# Body As A Site Of Subaltern Subversion In Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' And 'Behind The Bodice: Choli Ke Picche'

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The research paper probes into the complex socio-political systems operating on the female body which becomes the site for subaltern resistance and empowerment in the attempt to overthrow oppressive systems. The government policies and their alleged development projects are brought under severe scrutiny that have encroached upon and disrupted traditional ways of life of the tribal and rural populace. While exploitation, oppression and resistance remain at the helm in subaltern scholarship, body politics also seem to occupy a prominent place. It strives to delve deep into the value codes of the cultural and social settings apropos female body and the systemic politics bred in aesthetics, archivization and cumulative disadvantage. The implication of mainstream history requiring the need for recognising and studying the contributions and mass presence of the oppressed women characters in both the narratives is instrumental to bring home an understanding of their agency, undermining discourses on victimization while making strides towards a non-negotiation for discursive formations. All forms of state apparatuses including print and television media, law enforcement agency, language politics are put in the dock in the hands of Devi.

Mahasweta Devi lent unprecedented contributions to Indian literature and Bengali writings in particular, through her socially and politically intriguing tales. Her unconventional narrative style imparts a raw touch through realistic portrayal of life. Her handling of regional dialect, yet retaining a universal vigour remains unsurpassable. Her narratives become her weapon of social critique and female body a site of articulation.

Devi's oeuvre has close association with her activism as a compassionate chronicler of human experiences. Her characters are individuals with rare mettle and audacious spirit who subvert conventional codes through unassailable tenacity and resistance. Her writings are indictment on societal issues wherein she speaks for the underdog. She has a remarkable knack in exemplifying subtle nuances in the political and social institutions and the power dynamics that operate within these institutions. Seeking to lend agency to the disenfranchised groups particularly the tribal and indigenous people, she employs folktales, ballads and other historical archives building her literary works by giving her readers a taste of culture, a sense of belonging and grassroots activism at odds with the state machinery.

Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, in the same vein as his other concepts, stem from power dynamics. Power, for him, is essentially a fluid phenomenon that systemically coerces, monitors and legitimizes a set of social constructs. That also entails his idea of panopticism, whereby, he states that power operates through various disciplinary mechanisms, in ways other than force and at times through self-regulation. He maintains, "there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself." (Foucault 155) While some feminists do share some misgivings about his ideas, his conceptual framework is imperative in understanding an imbalance in power dynamics, particularly, female subservience and gender inequality. The inequality and subservience are prolonged through societal rules normalizing gendered behaviours. Since 'power is nothing if not opposed to what it is not' (Spiwak), chiefly driven by discursive formations, resistance and power remain as far apart as chalk and cheese. Discourse is "controlled, selected, organised

and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers". He goes as far as to admit that, of all the prohibited discourses, those surrounding politics and sexuality 'reveal its links with desire and power.' (Foucault 216) He also throws cues at the role of taboos and their cultural relativism rooted in the discipline of Anthropology, in a state of flux much like power, thwarting the existence of master narratives on sexuality, despite their inhibitions. Brown in Cultural Relativism remarks that "instead of seeking to integrate them (cultural relativism) into a metanarrative, it would be more productive to remain in that uneasy middle ground". (Brown 378-379) It could only be brought into praxis, by striking a balance between both universalism and relativism.

Foucault's conception of biopower equips readers with novel nuances to the literary pieces. Power not only intrinsically regulates behaviours and institutions, but also exerts control over human body. The body, if it were to run along the trajectory of power, discourse and the discursive formations, becomes a space of control, confinement and repression through "footbinding and corseting to rape and battering, to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilisation, unwanted pregnancy and (in the case of the African-American slave woman) explicit commodification". (Bordo 189) In quite an intriguing manner, it also resonates Hardt and Negri's ideas of biopolitical production, subject to which, individual bodies function under state and institution-driven scaffold. For them, even in the globalised world, these ideas are perpetuated and long-drawn out. In line with that thought, body becomes a bone of contention, a locus of strife and mediation that comes off as an incontestable deliberation. Also, while critiquing on Foucault's claim on the duality of power, they chart out a distinction between biopower and biopolitics 'the former could be defined as the power over life and the latter as the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity'. (Hardt and Negri 57) It is essentially biopolitics that has the proclivity to resist and undermine the 'dispositifs' of biopower.

Nayar observes that "body is the referent for all the cultural, social and economic trauma in a particular social order...When the victim 'shows' us her/his damaged, trembling, starving body s/he shows the form and nature of subjectivity's interaction with the world" (Nayar 42) Ergo; Devi, in both the stories, makes her protagonists retort through strength in vulnerability. The putative 'interaction', howsoever dormant it may appear on the surface, corroborates on the problematics of gendered subalternity camouflaging body politics.

The unmindful effortlessness with which breast is objectified and the categorical 'ululation' for autonomy give momentum to the discourse on body politics as 'the line between (hetero)sexuality and gender-violence begins to waver'. It does not go without mentioning that Devi is vigilant of falling into the pit of slippage by subverting normative patterns. Her take on gender dynamics transcends traditional 'socio-libidinal relationship between the sexes'. (Spivak)

Gayatri Spivak critiques Foucault's notions pertaining to power as ever more problematic for its rejection of ideology. She and other theorists accusing Marxism for its inherently reductionist 'positivist empiricism', find his ideas, not without its potential threats for consolidating imperialist dogmas in discerning the experiences of the oppressed. Rightly so, Spivak adduces that the "Third World subject, constructed as Europe's self-consolidating Other, obscures the true heterogeneity of decolonized/postcolonial space: the superexploited under global capitalism". (Cheah) In cognizance of the complex dynamics of the contested spaces like 'subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals, and the communities of zero workers on the street or in the country side' persist only as shadows because of the ramifications of colonialist enterprise. (Spivak 288) Even if innumerable attempts have been made to voice the subaltern, these only remain as 'proxies' as national subjects of global south and the 'consensual recipient of microcredit', the flag-bearers of globalization. The capitalist globalisation "end[s] up legitimizing, rather than challenging, capitalism's global hegemony and, more specifically, its neoliberal ideology". (Gabilondo 3) "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced" (Spivak 70). The 'sexual difference' is twice erased in the sense that there is silence of women accounts within mainstream narratives, furthermore, the silence *per se* is largely neglected.

Not to mention, for Spivak, Devi's works too are fraught with shortcomings. She disparages the academic feminists of the first world for their generalization of profound ideas, particularly in context with 'social-constructionism' to which they associate with 'anti-essentialism', in opposition to nature. This generalization of attributing core meanings is increasingly reductionary. To corroborate her claim, she relates it with *anagnorisis* experienced by Upin. He is taken by the beauty of her breasts because they are natural and secondly it strikes to him that they are susceptible to erosion and hence thinks it best to photograph them without weighing down the codes amid patriarchal rubrics. Upin suffers from 'archive fever', a concept given by Derrida which highlights our tendency to preserve documents as a method of controlling knowledge and meaning, which he does through his audacious action by imparting his own meaning to the archives.

'Draupadi', a seminal text by Mahasweta Devi exemplifies a rebellion among the peasant class catapulted by political reforms in Naxalbari, West Bengal. As a result of her rigorous research, she is considered as one of the biggest critics of the state policies which was in cahoots with the elite nationalists. She felt for the masses who were not given an agency, let alone, a space in the political and social fabric. Elite domination and the ensuing oppression of the masses, was followed by a rise in collective consciousness among the indigenous classes. Devi chronicles that consciousness in most of her writings, particularly, in 'Draupadi'. Her heroine, Dopdi, a tribal woman is on the loose and the Indian government has put a handsome prize money in her

name. She and her husband, are branded as anti-nationalists, for having indulged into anti-governmental activities. She has to grapple in the midst of a political turmoil in a tribal area for vehemently opposing the bureaucratic forces. She is targeted for lending her support to the Naxalite movement. Her capture and the ensuing torture meted out to her is just a minuscule specimen to the plight of the tribal segments in particular.

Towards the end, Senanayak and his men succeed in capturing her. She is cross interrogated for hours but does not utter a word. Senanayak commands his officials saying- 'Make her. Do the needful'. She is tormented, brutalized and subsequently raped throughout the night by scores of lustful brutes. At the sub-textual level, it is more than just a personal story, it's a political one, for, it incisively critiques the power-dynamics underway.

In the light of the mythical Draupadi of the Mahabharata, Mahasweta Devi delineates the heroine of her play subjected to a somewhat parallel plight in the sense, that both the women are victimized, where each becomes a target in the hands of patriarchal and state forces respectively, since both are equated with property.

The tables are turned nonetheless, when Dopdi instead of clinging to her clothes shuns them altogether, thereupon Devi, makes her one of the most unconventional woman protagonists of the times. She makes her walk naked in front of Senanayak and this intrepidly daring act chills us to the bones. Her unfathomable demeanour baffles us. She retorts:

"What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush-shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says, "There isn't man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me come on...and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid." (Spivak 33)

The common presumption that a woman is just a body and that her audacity in seeking political empowerment and justice could be countered by sexual battering, is proved wrong by Dopdi's moral strength. Her refusal to accept the manifestations of skin-deep respectability, in the form of a saree after the rape and her insistence on facing Senanayak in her terrible disfigured nakedness is a statement against conventional confining assumptions. The brutality against her body fails to crush her spirit. In such cases as hers, fear and shame are not experienced by the victim, rather they only denigrate the tyrants. The body, then becomes the voice of this defenceless rebel. Her nakedness is her power, the only weapon against her oppressors who have always sought to subjugate and silence her. She subverts the system of oppression by turning her apparent weakness into her source of power. She claims her body as her own, to which no male is entitled to. In a profound sense, she is born again, like a phoenix which rises, having with this act, recreated her own body. The idiosyncratic form that her rage takes, is unparalleled, so much so, that it can devour anything which might come its way. Surpassingly stalwart by spirit and categorically ungovernable by temperament, Dopdi unleashes horror before Senanayak, only leaving him vulnerable as adduced by Spivak in her foreword:

"It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject," who, still using the language of sexual "honour," can derisively call herself "the object of your search," whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object- "an unarmed target." (Spivak 11) "The girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them'. That is precisely what Devi is critiquing at.

After the dreadful pall which had previously enveloped her spirit, has gone, does she find herself in triumph, now that the worst has already been done, she has nothing more to fear about. In doing so, Senanayak, thus becomes an agent in Dopdi's new revelation. Once innocuous, her being, has been elevated to a stature of grandeur, which only leaves readers in admiration for this iron woman.

Had she made her Draupadi embrace her garment, the readers and spectators alike, would not have gone back to the legendary Draupadi of the epical Mahabharata in an endeavour to reconsider the magnificent text. The dramatist targets at the gist of this presumption, deconstructing it and recreating a very novel theme. Through the tribal Dopdi, Devi comes out yelling at the top notch, that by hitting out at her anatomical self, only gives the male counterpart an occasion to rip her exteriority, yet her spirit remains relentless and unwavering, emasculating the gendered paradigmatic structures.

The most animated specimen of nakedness as a performative space by Manipuri women was witnessed in the year 2004. The incensed move was a retaliation to the murder of Thangjam Manorama by the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Assam Rifles. The response as a way of protest is "within the discourse of the hegemonic system and their speech is indeed within a dialogic transaction." (Gayatri 5) Dopdi too, in a similar fashion emasculates Senanayak in spirit and he does not know how to deal with this defiant woman.

Devi brings elements from mythology and folktales to impart indigeneity in her oeuvres. The raw material that she borrows offer insights into her exhaustively researched literary repertoire. Her writing style is wilfully raw and provincial. But having said that, her concerns for class, gender and ethnic groups categorically remain all-inclusive.

'Behind the Bodice: *Choli ke Pichhe*' is a short story by Devi that is principally focussed on decentring gender, sex and elite politics in an endeavour to excavate a unisex approach towards womanhood. In the tale, Upin photographs breasts of Gangor, a rural woman, and brings them in public glare. This brings doom

for her and in turn raises complex issues and their nuances. In speaking for her, Devi collectively speaks for her entire tribe. She has fastidiously touched upon some of nation's pressing matters.

The striking parallel between the title of the story to the Hindi song '*Choli ke peeche*' is imperative to explore the complexity and complicity between anti-essentialism and discursive formations. While 'crop failure--earthquake, everywhere clashes between so-called terrorists and state power' went by the wayside, the nation was already abuzz with the ruckus created by the rivetingly lewd associations of the song. The incessant cries of 'Invasion! Invasion!' are alarming for the nation is apprehensive of 'cultural invasion'. The photographs of Gangor stand as the agent of this invasion, yet, a national sensation. The reception of such invasion is akin to Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural ambivalence for colonial invasion owing to its duality. There is both attraction and aversion as much as binging on the song '*choli ke piche*' in cognito.

"Upin's news did not appear in the paper as news of Upin". Quite so, other matters, like his body being crushed by train are eclipsed by the cause célèbre made by the perpetrator in Upin. In so doing, he invites doom for him and his muse. The reference to the dwelling of Upin and Shital as the 'dead end road' reverberates the plight and the impending catastrophe that is to befall the couple- for Upin his painful demise and for Shital who is rendered a distraught widow. Upin takes photographs of Gangor's breasts and sells those pictures. Gangor then, is too naïve to understand the dire consequences of his unmindful actions rooted in perfunctory ideals of aesthetics. He compares her natural breasts to that of her wife Shital's silicon ones.

"The half-naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. *Save them! Save the breast!*" These inciting words on the banner seem to be the pandemonium of the artist to save his art from 'erosion', otherwise inevitable. Not only does he become an agent of erosion, but also expedites the process. This casts light upon the argument laid by Gayatri Spivak in the introductory preface to 'Breast Stories', where she adduces that the concern should not exclusively be upon 'aesthetics and politics, but aesthetics and ethics, archivization and responsibility'. The trajectory that Upin pursues in a bid to preserve the aesthetics is proved unidimensional and erroneous. Devi's use of a transferred epithet of her breasts as 'the cleavage of Konarak chest' is deliberate hinting at their objectification as though it were a piece of sculpture.

The names of the characters Dopdi and Gangor, it seems, have been prudently considered. Dopdi is a distorted version of Draupadi. Interestingly, in the story itself, Devi changes her name from Dopdi to Draupadi, which subtly reverberates the similar fate of the two. Nevertheless, the propinquity between the two women drifts apart, while the one is saved, the other damned. The legendary Draupadi is rescued, whilst Dopdi Mejhén is gang-raped in police custody by the men of Senanayak. Draupadi of the Mahabharata had to beg for divine intervention, necessarily from a demigod to safeguard her honour, on the contrary, Devi makes her Dopdi ululate, whereby her significant ululation, then becomes her war cry and at the same time repudiates the primeval text, which she contends, is intrinsically elitist. At the other end of spectrum, etymologically, Gangor is decrypted as 'Ganagauri' by Shital to whom Spivak associate as the 'problematic character', an intellectual woman of global south who engages in a 'hybridist postnational talk'. For theorists, Gangor connotes 'ganadharshan', meaning-rape of the people. There is an added obscurity to the lexicon, that makes it significantly more challenging to grasp. How, did the rape by the people become rape of the people or in fact, rape by the law-protectors in a democratic state? Or it could also insinuate at the rape (exploitation) of the people in the hands of the state.

Both the mythical Draupadi and the goddess Ganagauri demonstrate a striking dichotomy with them. Their situations might be different, nonetheless, the tragic denouement meted out to them remains similar. With rape, both become 'corrupt through usage' and both respond by subverting the value codes of the 'sexual differential. Ganghor exposes her 'straw--chaff' rendered dry because of gangrape every now and then.

The subtle yet powerful references to drought, contaminated river water and famine find their way in the narrative. Devi uncontestedly leaves cues of the unpropitious fruits of modernisation and its failure in accommodating the underprivileged into the national and political tapestry. The paltry amount Ganghor demands for every picture clicked evokes deprivation and distress. She raises the money the next time she meets Upin which reflects her awareness of her beauty. With that being said, like Upin, she too remains oblivious of the repercussions of the 'seismic upheaval in his brain' by virtue of 'mammal projections'. Ganghor's cry for "cloth to wear...a bite to eat...a place to sleep for mother and child...What to do Sir...no field, no land, living is very hard...pots and pans...stove and knife...cleaning rooms...laundry...I'll do anything Sir..." (Devi 127) One can clearly sense the inevitable destitution in her words plus the failure of the government in accommodating the people on the fringes within its national fabric.

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