



The Theme of Subalterneity in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the thematic and symbolic significance of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi," translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The story, set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, delves into the brutal realities faced by tribal women in India. Through the character of Dopdi Mejhen, Devi critiques the systemic oppression, gendered violence, and the resilience of subaltern women. This analysis employs Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory to examine the intersection of caste, class, and gender, highlighting the ways in which subaltern voices are marginalized and the strategies of resistance they employ.

Key words: Mahasweta Devi, Draupadi, Dopdi Mejhen, Subaltern Studies, postcolonial theory, gendered violence, Naxalite movement.

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"I have never had the capacity or the urge to create art for art's sake. Since I never learned to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for the protest of injustice and exploitation" (Devi, Preface to Shrestha Galpa).

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi(1978)," translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is a powerful narrative that encapsulates the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression faced by tribal women in India. Set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in the 1970s, the story follows the character of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal revolutionary who becomes a symbol of resistance against state oppression. Devi's storytelling is marked by stark realism and powerful imagery, which effectively convey the brutal realities and resilience of subaltern women.

Historical and Political Context

The Naxalite movement, which began in the late 1960s, was a radical communist movement that aimed to overthrow the feudal system in rural India and address the issues of land redistribution and peasant rights. The movement gained significant traction among tribal communities in West Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, who were subjected to severe exploitation and marginalization. Devi's "Draupadi" is set in this tumultuous period and reflects the socio-political dynamics of the time.

Character Analysis: Dopdi Mejhen

Dopdi Mejhen, the protagonist of "Draupadi," is a tribal woman who becomes a fierce revolutionary. Her journey from a marginalized tribal woman to a defiant insurgent encapsulates the broader struggles of subaltern communities. The name "Draupadi," given to her by her upper-caste mistress, is deeply ironic. In the Hindu epic Mahabharata, Draupadi is a royal figure whose dignity is protected by divine intervention. In contrast, Dopdi is a subaltern woman whose dignity is stripped away by state violence without any divine or societal intervention.

Devi uses Dopdi's character to challenge the romanticized and sanitized narratives of resistance and to highlight the visceral realities of oppression. Dopdi's resilience and defiance in the face of extreme violence make her a powerful symbol of subaltern resistance.

Gendered Violence and State Oppression

"Draupadi" is a stark portrayal of the gendered violence inflicted upon subaltern women by the state. Dopdi is captured, brutally raped, and tortured by police officers as a punishment for her revolutionary activities. This act of violence is not just an assault on her body but a systematic attempt to break her spirit and deter other women from joining the resistance. Devi's unflinching depiction of this violence exposes the brutal tactics used by the state to maintain control over marginalized communities.

The climax of the story is a powerful moment of defiance. After being raped and tortured, Dopdi refuses to cover her naked, wounded body. She confronts her captors with a fearless and unyielding stance, challenging their authority and exposing their brutality. Devi writes, "Dopdi stands before Senanayak, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (Devi 37). This act of resistance transforms her body from a site of victimization to a powerful symbol of defiance.

Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory

Subaltern Studies, a theoretical framework developed by scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, aims to recover the voices and experiences of marginalized groups often erased from mainstream historical narratives. Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interrogates the ability of the subaltern to have agency and voice within dominant power structures (Spivak 104). Dopdi's story reflects this struggle for voice and agency within an oppressive socio-political system.

Spivak's translation and introduction to "Draupadi" provide a critical lens through which to understand the subaltern condition. She notes that Devi's narrative challenges the romanticized portrayals of resistance and instead offers a raw and unflinching look at the violence faced by subaltern women. Spivak writes, "Draupadi is not a text of protest or of action, but of profound questioning" (Spivak viii).

Symbolism and Imagery

Devi's use of symbolism and imagery in "Draupadi" is integral to the story's impact. The repeated references to Dopdi's naked, wounded body highlight the physical and psychological toll of state violence. The image of Dopdi standing naked before her captors is a powerful symbol of her defiance and resilience. Devi writes, "There is no cloth on Dopdi's body. She is naked. Her black body gleams like the sunlit Charak trees in the spring forest" (Devi 35).

The contrast between Dopdi's vulnerable, wounded body and her unyielding spirit underscores the complexity of subaltern resistance. Devi uses this imagery to challenge the perception of subaltern women as passive victims and instead portrays them as active agents of resistance.

Critical Reception and Impact

"Draupadi" has been widely studied and analyzed within the fields of postcolonial literature and gender studies. The story has been praised for its unflinching portrayal of gendered violence and its nuanced depiction of subaltern resistance. Scholars have noted that Devi's narrative provides a powerful critique of state oppression and the exploitation of marginalized communities.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of "Draupadi" has been particularly influential in bringing the story to an international audience. Spivak's critical introduction and analysis have provided a deeper understanding of the socio-political context and the subaltern condition depicted in the story. Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak without being mediated by hegemonic structures is reflected in Dopdi's struggle for voice and agency.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" is a powerful and poignant narrative that captures the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression faced by subaltern women. Through the character of Dopdi Mejhren, Devi critiques the systemic violence and marginalization inflicted upon tribal communities and highlights the resilience and defiance of subaltern women. By employing Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, this analysis underscores the importance of recognizing and amplifying subaltern voices in literary and academic discourses. Devi's narrative not only highlights the struggles of subaltern women but also challenges readers to confront the systemic inequalities that sustain their oppression. Through her nuanced portrayal of Dopdi's resilience and resistance, Devi underscores the need for a more ethical and inclusive representation of subaltern lives.

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