



---

## Subaltern Voice In Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi

**Dr. Kaushik Kr. Deka** Associate Professor, Department of English M.N.C. Balika Mahavidyalaya, Nalbari.

---

### **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. Devi through her characters tries to show that women 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. Subaltern voice or in other words the voice of the oppressed in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi is clearly visible in her main protagonist - Draupadi, who rebelliously struts back to the police officer to move away their eyes in shame after she was gang raped by them. Here she makes a space where private becomes the public and the political.

**Key Words:** Subaltern, Draupadi, Marginalized, Empowerment, Naxalites.

### **Introduction:**

In 1985 Gayatri Spivak tossed a challenge to the Western Academy by asking 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak 1985) By 'subaltern', Spivak means the oppressed. Literally it means 'of inferior rank' (Hawthorn 345). The widespread use of this term builds upon the work of an Italian writer Antonio Gramsci, whose book 'Notes on the Italian History' open with a section entitled 'History of the Subaltern Classes'. Gramsci's Notes were written between 1934-35, while he was in prison in fascist Italy. Gramsci's focus of concern was in Italian history and he says that the subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they become a state. In conclusion he says that subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups (Hawthorn 345). Gramsci's idea and definition on the subaltern classes have a significant contribution in the field of Postcolonial literature. Dealing with the concept of 'subaltern', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article, Can the Subaltern Speak? draws more clearly on this and suggests that the phase development of the subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project. In Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi the presentation of the main protagonist Draupadi as the subaltern, plays a very significant role.

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. The very name Draupadi takes us back to the age of Mahabharata, where Duryodhan, the enemy king begins to pull Draupadi's sari in the open royal court. Draupadi silently prays to lord Krishna and it is the miracles of Krishna that she is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly striped off. But Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi is not like that. She is a representation of boldness. When she is gang raped by police, she does not pray to lord Krishna to save her but struts back to the police officers rebelliously who in turn forced to move away their eyes in shame.

### **Methodology:**

The paper will undertake the study through an examination of primary and secondary text related to Mahasweta Devi's text 'Draupadi' which has been translated by Gayatri Spivak. The research methodology to be followed here is the theoretical frame and concept of subaltern voice as stated by Gayatri Spivak in her write up 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' The major concern of this paper is to highlight the subaltern voice through a character named Draupadi.

### **Analysis:**

In Draupadi, when we first meet her, she is living in the forest of Jharkhand with a group of Naxalite rebels and is on the most wanted list of the police. The significant operation Bakuli in 1971 is launched by the government to capture specially Draupadi and her husband Dulna. The police forces try their best to keep them in custody. Politically active Draupadi has had a hand in the killings of a few atrocious landlords. She instructs our respect and regards when she displays massive courage in not recovering her husband's dead body and thus saving herself from getting caught at the hands of police who might have used her as a means of getting to the other rebels. Her husband Dulna, whom she loves more than 'her blood' was shot dead by the police while he was drinking water,

however she takes her revenge by destroying Dukhiram, the soldier and the man she holds responsible for the death of her husband.

Draupodi was confident that she has her protective weapon- a baby scythe, very sharp to kill hundreds of Dukhiram. The Naxalites in their guerrilla war always used such type of weapons to kill their enemies. However, after the death of her husband she was not at all happy. Her thoughts as she walks take her again to Dulna's death. Dulna died but he didn't lose anyone's life. It also gives her some sorts of pride. Following Arijit's instruction, she enters the forest feeling sure that police could not find her out easily. But she makes a mistake. Police surrounded her. Senanayak commands Draupadi's arrest and to stop her at any cost. Draupadi knows that there is no hope to escape or to hide. She recalls the instruction given by Arijit: 'just as you must know when you have won you must also acknowledge defeat and start the activities of the next stage' and it is with this instruction in mind she is ready to face her defeat, to surrender and inform her comrades of the danger that lay ahead of her and for them. She sends her message:

'...now Draupadi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far.' (Devi 195)

Draupodi is arrested at 6.35 pm. It takes an hour to get her to camp. Consequently, she is questioned by the police for the next hour during this time no one touched her. Instead she is given a canvas stool to sit on. Around at 8.57 pm Senanayak left for dinner, with instructions to his subordinates, 'Make her... Do the needful'. (Spivak 35)

What occurs after this is beyond expression. She is tortured, injured and gang raped throughout the night. It is the conclusion of her political punishment by the agents of the law. This practice of arrest and consequent degradation are the common instrument of the First World life. In her foreword to 'Draupodi' Spivak presents her as a challenge to first world scholarly readers when she claims that Senanayak, the story's villain is 'the closest approximation to the First World scholars in search of the Third World' (Spivak 1)

Mahasweta Devi in her depiction of the rape scene hazes and merges the lines between the public and the private. The private pain of Draupodi and the private distortion of the police personals are indorsed in the very public space of the police camp. Thus, she makes a space where private becomes the public and the political. The behaviour that she receives at the police custody crosses all the limits of violence:

'... Draupodi, strangely enough sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed...' (Spivak 35)

The punishment she has to receive is inexpressible for she could not make out how many came to rape her four, five or six, seven or even more. In all this she assumes a mode of passive struggle. After the rape she is summoned to meet Senanayak in his tent for interaction. The policeman has done what they could to prepare her dress but Draupodi refuses to do so. She refuses to wash and clothe her rape ravished body. Now she is ready to turn the Senanayak's long cherished dream to a nightmare. She rejects to remove the signs of the night's brutality and remains publicly naked at her own persistence. There is a turmoil as if the alarm has sounded in the prison. She violently utters: What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?' (Spivak 37)

Here she challenges the Senanyak's masculinity. Draupodi does not let her night's brutality to be weakened, unnoticed rather she shakes with indomitable laughter and approaches Senanayak with a question that leads him baffled. She says: 'the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?' (Spivak 37)

At this unexpected moment Senanayak is terribly afraid. Draupodi brings her naked black body closure to him, and laughs out loud and courageously. He is unable to comprehend her behaviour. She wipes her bleeding lips on her palm and in a strident and frightening voice blamed him. Spitting blood on the front of his white shirt, Draupodi again and again accuses, refuses to be agent to be clothed and dares to be encountered- 'Kounter'.

### **Conclusion:**

Fearless, courageous and full of dignity, Draupodi raises herself above the hierarchy of the subaltern and proves against what Spivak says -'Can the subaltern speak?'. She not only speaks with a daring, defiant move but also drives the Senanayak with her two wounded breasts. The subaltern voice of a female-Draupodi is clearly audible to terrifying the so called 'Elite' the Senanayak. Apprehended by the army Draupadi is tortured and raped. In spite of that she never like to submit to the violence meted out to her and instead stands against her oppressor as symbol of revolt. In short it can be stated that Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi brings out the rebellious spirit of a courageous woman named Draupadi who has been exploited by the patriarchal society who dares to stand up to attain empowerment. The world of Draupadi is not similar to a traditional house wife rather her struggle for life for existence and for justice continues alongside her male counterpart. Her character brings to light the indomitable power of a woman against the male chauvinism.

### **Work Cited:**

Devi, Mahasweta. Draupadi In in Other World: Essays in the Cultural Politics. Ed and Trans. Gayatri Spivak. New York/London, Routledge, 1988

Hawthorn, Jeremy. A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory: ARNOLD, London, 2003

Spivak, Gayatri. Breast Stories: Kolkata, Seagull, 2002

Spivak, Gayatri. *Can The Subaltern Speak?* Macmillan Education, Basingstoke, 1985