

## EMERGENT WOMAN IN EMERGENT TEXT: WOMAN AS REBEL IN THE SELECT NOVEL OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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**Abstract:** Mahasweta Devi the renowned Bengali writer occupies an iconic stature in the contemporary Indian literary scenario for her diverse writings. Prolific she has been and unique in telling stories and speaking truth about struggles and courage of women-, tribal women. Her accuracy in documenting the struggles and sufferings of the exploited captivated the attention of critics like GayatriSpivak. It is she who has brought MahaswetaDev before a wider audience by translating her seminal works in English. Spivak not only translated but also introduced Mahasweta into the English –speaking world. Devi 's engagement with the diverse and seemingly disassociated fields of journalism ,socio-political activism, literature and history -has drawn the critical inquiry of national and international critics and scholars. Since Spivak's pronouncement on her, Mahasweta's works have spawned a virtual translation of explosion and this explosion in the Indian literary scene demands an expansion of critical inquiry to facilitate the comprehension of her political-creative vision and expression.

Mahasweta Devi is a compulsive activist-writer. Her active involvement in the tribal people's struggle for their ethnic identity and social injustice in the hegemonies operating in the name of nation and culture. She picks up feminism from the realm of ideology and employs it with adaptation, internalization and manipulation. Her writings reflect the characteristic woman's perspective but she feels quite uneasy when being labeled as feminist writer. But her portrayal of subjugation of women in her oeuvre and their fight for recognition in the patriarchal and elite society invariably add a feminist dimension to her work. Throughout her varied fiction women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of caste and class. Her women protagonists are poor and poverty stricken, yet stronger than their counterparts. These indigenous people are referred to as "the subaltern" and the "fourth world"

Draupadi , one of her feminist short stories in Breast Stories has been published in the year 1978.Set in the socio-political milieu -Naxalite Movement- which began as peasant rebellion in the Naxalite area of West Bengal in1967the story revolves around Draupadi ,also called Dopdi,the protagonist is not a mythological queen[Draudpadi] exiled to the forest. She is a poor peasant woman familiar with the forest ,actively participating in the war against injustice. No divine being intervenes when she is tortured but she ,like the legendary queen uses her physical presence to make a statement to the world. Instead of cleansing and covering her body full of wounds inflicted upon her she removes her clothes and presents herself as she is to Senananak, the army officer as the explicit manifestation of his men's cruelty and injustice to her as a woman. As in the case of Draupadi ,DopdiMejhen is also victimized by patriarchal order for being a woman and a revolutionary insurgent. In this powerful retelling of the story of MahabhrataDraupadi has been vividly portrayed as a rebel who is cornered by the police in a bid to suppress the forces she represents

The short stories of MahaswetaDevi are the voiced articulations of 'the Others' in contemporary Indian society. They are not only about marginalized, but ,marginalized within the communities of marginalized. Mahasweta Devi's voice does not simply ventriloquise the plight of those at the edge of civilization but goes beyond to analyse the power structures that engender marginalization as replicated in the texture of the society of marginal. When the society endangers, the subaltern becomes a rebel, rather becomes an agent as in the case of Dopdi dismantling the theory of subalternity. In fact , ,Dopdi/Draupadi ' metamorphoses into a powerful agent'.and hence she, as an individual, may be interpreted as a woman breaking the bonds of gender and of her race-caste-class.Indeed, she is the symbol of social change that.has been taking place among the tribals..

**Key words:**subaltern triple colonization revolutionary emergent woman

**Introduction:** *"Whether he is wealthy or poor, the Rebel is really an emperor because he has broken the chains of society's repressive conditioning and opinions." We are rebels in our willingness to discover and explore the vast inner and outer landscapes of our lives. We are rebels in that we have dared to write our stories down. We are rebels because of our courage to take responsibility with our creations, and to live our*

*truth out in the open. We cannot be trapped by customs, rules or dogma. We "cannot be imprisoned . . ." We upset the routine and make others uncomfortable in their loungers. "No organization confines her, no community, no society no nation." We belong everywhere because we are not possessed by anyone.-OshoZewTarot "We are fighting a great war. War against superstition (you see, the society*

thinks of them as criminals); war against atrocity (because police and public both kill them cruelly); war against a system which allows these things to happen. So, this is really a war of liberation. My reading is, India cannot be called really independent because these people have been kept in bondage. Also because this basic war was not fought. That is why this so-called image of India is crumbling down on all fronts. That's all." ("Mahasweta Devi on Tribal Welfare").

India is a "multilingual, multiracial, multireligious, multi cultural, country, a yet the exponents of Indians sometimes tend to overlook this pluralism " It is perhaps true to say that with the advent of women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantra Sahal, Anita Desai and more recently Shashi Deshpande, and Mahasweta Devi the predicament of women has come to occupy the centre stage in Indian English fiction. But the Indian English novel speaking in terms of cultural specificity did embrace largely the Hindu world view- brahminical, vedantic, to be more precise. It is only in the last decade or so that a few sections of Indian society who were either marginally or hardly represented in English fiction.

The paper on Emergent Woman in Emergent Text focuses on the women characters in the literary output of Mahasweta Devi in general and Draupadi, in particular, who defies the subalternity, in turn, defies the Society and Establishment in India. Mahasweta Devi, one of the few outstanding contemporary Indian women writers, whose writings have been brought into international limelight by critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Indeed, Mahasweta Devi has been well served by her translators. As a prolific and best-selling author, she has more than hundred short fictions, a few plays and novels in Bengali language, to her credit. She is an activist and a creative thinker as well. As a creative thinker Mahasweta Devi is unique in more than one way. Her contribution to literature is so varied and expansive that an attempt is made to highlight the special characteristic of her uniqueness in narrating the stories about the Adivasi [tribals] - Sandals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas. Her writings portray vividly the inner lives of the tribal communities and landless laborers through powerful dialogues in the region's local dialects. She is good at depicting the life-like portraits of advisees in her works and that is possible because of her meticulous research conducted [oral] into real life of people whom she writes about and her deep interest in ancient mythology and history. Since she is a creator of exemplary and powerful women characters, it is apt to comment that Devi 'has more heroines than heroes.' After 1980s Mahasweta Devi has become

internationally famous for her experimented social documentary fiction. Moreover, she has been admired and read not for art for art's sake but for her careful researched historical records, investigative journalism and activist fieldwork 'in the Indian forest and hillside. It is worth to quote her own words, 'I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake..... I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation. Her uniqueness lies in her profound humanism and she is able to hear 'the still sad music of humanity'-the joys and sorrows, the exploitation and sufferings and the abject poverty of tribals. Hence her writings are recognized for giving voice to the "voiceless section of the Indian society."

One of the novellas in Breast Stories titled Draupadi, brings to our mind a modern myth of a tribal peasant revolutionary. Draupadi Mehen the protagonist is a twenty-seven year old widow who has been wanted by the Army in Operation Forest Jharkhni for having notoriously planned and executed, with the help of her husband Dulna, murder, mayhem on their oppressors. Captain Arjan Singh has been trying to arrest him. At last, the impossible case of the invisible Mehen is brought before the army officer Mr. Senanayak. Dulna is killed in an encounter with the police. Dopadi, zealously and frenziedly continues the work that her husband left incomplete. She is at the helm of revolutionary activities and remains a target for the Army Senanayak. Senanayak arrests Dopdi. and is brought before him. As "Senanayak approaches, she walks to him naked, her head high" .For a moment, she induces an immense fear' which can not be explained but her courage baffles him. Senanayak barks, What is this? Where are her clothes?. Draupadi comes closer and closer and shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak can not understand..... [she] says in a voice as terrifying, as sky splitting and sharp as ululation, What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you aman?..... What more can you do? ...what more can you do?, Come on, counter me=counter me-? Senanayak for the first time is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. [196] In this context to quote Margret Laurence views on female heroes [204] is apt here:

" I can probably understand a character that was a woman better than a man. I also feel that you are a woman it is perfectly natural to have woman protagonist. I do not feel I write just for and about women. But I feel there are certain things I can get only through women."

Unlike other passive rape victims-Devi does not let her woman protagonist suffer in silence. With

unconquerable and indomitable spirit the naked and bleeding Draupadi faces her rapists defiantly resisting the sexual molestation and mutilation on her body. Thus Draupadi- the text analyzed -shakes the conscience of fellow citizens, to make them notice, identify, analyse what goes unnoticed, unheard..

Mahasweta Devi like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, two major Afro-American women writers, deals with the plights and predicaments, the stresses and strains—Sturm-und-Drang--, the anxieties and tensions—Angst—handicaps confronted by woman. It is argued in this context that the biological trap, determinants, castration complex, dependent complex and inferiority complex have a commanding effect on the female psyche.. According to Devi to quote James Baldwin 's vision of Otherness and Community [121]

...suffering if endured creatively, leads to self knowledge, which in turn, can offer the possibilities of achieving a sense of self...

Mahasweta Devi the compulsive activist, very easily can be compared with the Black women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison for like them, She projects the fin de siècle and the pervasive anomie of the Kafkan Wasteland. She cries for vengeance, like the Old Testaments Prophets against the victimizers who perpetrate and cause social ills and social injustices such as denials, deprivations, exploitation and dehumanization of the victims and the less privileged sections of the society. As such, she wants her oeuvre to provide the necessary and needed correction and healthy and definitive prescriptions so that the Society and the Establishment would mend and alter for the better.. Her stories and plays are a caustic comment on India as a nation and the sociopolitical trajectory of the country since Independence. They try to convey her vision of society mainly by her very choice of her characters and motifs she attributes to them as through Draupadi. Economic exploitation, sexual oppression and state violence—all three—made the lives of woman characters miserable and torturous as in Draupadi, and these women become rebels against the society and the nation as well. Not only through Dopdi but also through other protagonists such as Rudali, Stanadayini, Douloti the author tells "The sole of my writings is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies.. My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation further s that burning anger.... [I] believe in anger in justified violence and so peel the mask of the face the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked

brutality, savagery and caste and class exploitation..... "Just like her tribal heroines, Mahasweta Devi the creator is also rebel within and without. To quote Mahasweta Devi in her conversation with Gabrille Collu, "Draupadi was an extremely courageous Naxalite woman fighter. Tribal women have terrible resilience, terrible courage"

It is pertinent to study the character of titular heroine Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi revisionary feminist short story Draupadi. The central character Dopdi as she is often referred to in the text, is involved in a revolutionary movement—the Naxalite Movement in India. The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s have had a significant impact on her and in her works. Dopdi is presented as a strong woman from the outset and emerge as an agent; she is not presented as 'the silent victim' and in this context Spivak 's assertion that the subaltern female can not speak' does not hold good and theory has been dismantled. Devi's Dopdi speaks and questions Senanayak. The story concludes with Senanayak being afraid to stand before an armed target, terribly afraid' [37]. It is here Draupadi grows in stature as compared to her mythological Queen in Mahabhrata.. Nandini Sen says in her Introduction, By redefining and undermining patriarchy Senanayak 's unarmed "victim "stands fearlessly while Senanayak is terribly afraid. Here is a subaltern woman becomes an emergent woman. Devi flouts terms like Feminism. and she says, "I write as a writer and not as a woman." In an interview she asserts, 'I never consider myself as a woman writer, as a feminist writer ' but all her works are woman centered and though she denies it would be reductive not to consider her texts as "site of feminist concerns'. Undoubtedly her feminism is ingrained in her writings which strives to free from her subjugation and oppression she is subjected to in the patriarchal world. The woman is triply colonized and victimized as ".her body becomes the site of exploitation' The scene of rape occurs at the end of the story. Life after rape is itself a unique feature of feminist fiction. Rape, becomes a recurrent metaphor and woman's body becomes motif. Mahasweta Devi allows multiple rape of Dopdi. For her, rape has turned her sex into a physical wound. and her action strongly asserts ' my honour does not lie between my legs' One need not crouch in his/her brow to see her novels in a feminist way because Devi's texts have special significance when read as feminist text.. While it is possible to treat it as a challenge, it is better to turn it into an opportunity and a starting point. To see her novels in a feminist way may not be very hard task because she is politically and aesthetically feminist which is seen in Draupadi explicitly. In fact she is a fiery in her words and actions since 1980s onwards, she has been

actively associated with many grassroots level social movements around the question of bonded labour, persistent feudalism in rural polity, state negligence and forceful acquisition of agricultural land, and tribal uprising. She has been at the forefronts of many of these movements which are ever closer to her heart.

Mahasweta Devi's narratives – to borrow a term from Rosalind Coward's 1980 essay, 'Are women novels? – indisputably women-centered'. To add emphasis to this question and to reply it would be better to turn to what Bettina Aptheker describes in *Tapestries of Life* as the task of putting women at the center of thinking by starting with women's experience and forming patterns from it 'In the view of a critic such as Coward for whom feminism must always be the alignment of women in a political movement with particular political aims and objectives'

During her conversation with eminent critics like Spivak, Mahasweta Devi insists that her works have nothing to do with feminism. But a nuanced reading of her works reveals how her women can

be located with Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple* and Meridian in *Meridian*, and her women are speaking subalterns fighting for their rights. Often Devi shows her anger when people separate the tribals, calling them different. Once she retorts "Who says they are different? You deny rights to these people, make them invisible and label them as different".

Mahasweta Devi's fictions demonstrate the persistence of oppression that exists unchanged even after the independence in a democratic India notwithstanding the high claims of socio-economic and political reforms. Political and legislative solutions are ineffective, incompetent and futile. So, Mahasweta turns to the small things on the human scale as providing places where the human spirit is tested and where it occasionally triumphs through sheer endurance, where inequalities are born and where they may be extinguished, and where humanity's grand pretensions finally terminate. She believes that there is much yet to be done for the tribals whom Devi characterizes as 'suffering spectators of India that is travelling towards 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.

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