



Voices of the Marginal: Comparative Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's “Draupadi” and Asit Rai's *Yantrana*

Rathika Subba

Abstract

Postcolonialism has ushered in creating possibilities to locate the voices of the marginalized. In this light Mahasweta Devi is one of the prolific writers who has championed the cause of the suppressed and the marginalized sections of the society. Her works seek to rewrite and represent their history and reality as they are the ones who actually contribute towards history writing. “Draupadi” (1981) is about individual courage, determination and resilience. The protagonist of the story cuts across class, caste and gender barriers and protests against the brutality of state-sponsored violence, atrocity and inhumanity. She breaks the shackles of confinement of patriarchy and state-aided cruelty as it specifically decides the punishment for her because she is an ‘insurgent’, ‘culprit’ and above all a woman. Similar echoes are found in a Nepali novel *Yantrana* (1980) by Asit Rai. It brings out the plight and torture of Chandrabahadur, a tea garden worker, who dares to speak against the inhuman system of the ‘maliks’ who have usurped all the power to keep the workers subordinated. It is about his fight against the inhuman treatment and management in the tea garden. The plantation system in the tea garden on the other hand has the indirect support of the government to crush any voice of dissent and discord. Both in Mahasweta Devi's “Draupadi” and Asit Rai's *Yantrana* the marginalized voices spring out of the intended and extended exclusion and suppression.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Marginalized, Voices, Violence, Power.

Re-interpretation in postcolonial studies helps to pay attention to the text and its context in which it is produced. One of the key aspects of post colonialism as a literary theory is to break binaries, redefine them and to establish counter-narratives of resistance, rewrite history and challenge the essentialist notion of identity. “Draupadi”, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a story by Mahasweta Devi about a twenty-seven year old tribal woman named Dopdi Mejhen whose husband Dulna Majhi is killed in a police encounter during the Operation Forest Jharkhani. *Yantrana* which can be loosely translated as ‘torture/torment’ is a Nepali novel by a renowned writer Asit Rai. It is a story about an eighteen year old, Chandrabahadur who after matriculation starts working in the tea garden and whose forefathers too spent their entire life as tea workers. His widowed mother too is a tea worker. “Draupadi” and *Yantrana* share many common attributes as both of these texts question the marginality through their protagonists and their repressed ‘othering.’ They seek to re-present, rewrite and contemporize history and present the reality of the ones who actually contribute to history writing. Both the texts seek to develop a perspective whereby the status of marginality creates sources of energy and potential change.

“Draupadi” brings out the story of courage, determination and resilience exhibited by a

widowed Dopdi Mejhen. She finds a way out to the miseries of herself and her lot in the determination to struggle and fight. This is not just a fight for bread but also to negotiate the impending rights of the forcefully deprived. Spivak writes:

The story is a moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the one hand, a law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression, on the other, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles. (Spivak, 1981, p. 26)

Dopdi has to bear every sort of violence upon her so that the truth can be spoken out. The power of the pen of Mahasweta Devi lies in her exposition of the cruelty, inhumanity and barbarity upon the under-privileged section starkly. One cannot refuse with the daring courage that she shows to deal with injustice being meted out to her protagonists like Dopdi, Sanichari, Brati and a host of others. Through them she speaks about the volumes of wrongs that have been done and that needs to be confronted because it is the only way left in order to leave a mark. So these characters speak through confrontation.

Dopdi has to speak otherwise she will be lost in obliteration being pressed by the system which works favourably for the ones who own, produce and manipulate it. The story catches the readers' attention from its very opening where a lone, widowed Dopdi Mejhen, "whether dead or alive" (Spivak, 1981, p. 392) is being hunted because she has caused a threat to the system which wants the voiceless to always remain so. She "... is a carbuncle on the government's backside" (Spivak, 1981, p. 395) because she refuses to be subdued and crushed. An illiterate, poor and lower caste tribal woman who cannot pronounce her own Sanskritized name 'Draupadi' has understood power-play, suppression of the state and its ancillary functionaries. She is on the list of the wanted because along with other comrades she has shown courage to protest against continued violence and cruelty upon the victimized tribals. Their fundamental necessities and rights have been traded by the state and the government. She is labelled as the 'most notorious female' because she asserts the rights to residence in the soil and the forests which rightfully belong to the poor tribals. It takes a whole lot of army and police to hunt her.

Dopdi confronts the cruelty of the state through the endurance of her body. It becomes imperative for the government and its police/army officials to catch her because she endeavours to unmask the hegemony of the powerful over everything that give them security. "Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture" (Spivak, 1981, p. 397) For the poor, landless and deprived tribal; torture has become an integral part of their life and it should not be accepted. That they have been protecting their forest and soil with their lives is reflected by Dopdi and her comrades some of whom are killed in a police encounter. Operation Forest Jharkhani is necessitated to silence the ones who stand against power, its ruthless operation and the state that always favours the powerful.

In Mahasweta Devi's stories the courage to confront becomes an equally befitting strategy against the hegemonic state apparatus. Dopdi enacts this first by killing Surja Sahu because "... his mouth watered when he looked at [her] me" (ibid.: 398). Thereafter she starts formulating strategies against the greater forces of the government which considers them as law-breakers and threats to the state. Her victimization is corroborated in a multiple ways because of her gender, caste, class and culture. She is the marginalized 'other' and that is why state can enforce its violence upon her. But certainly, she is indomitable. Mahasweta Devi allows her oppressed, suppressed and victimized characters speak through persistent resistance. Dopdi is the undefeatable voice despite being publicly assaulted, repeatedly raped

and brutally violated. She is the indefatigable source of the possibility of resistance not just limited to fiction but representing authorial conviction in the individual and collective resistance against the various mechanisms of the state and its allied forces. Mahasweta Devi has written stories about ordinary people who make real history and the inspiration for her writings comes from those people who are exploited and used and still do not accept defeat. Dopdi's flaunting of the ravaged and naked body is her outrageous negotiation with state-sponsored violence, brutality, patriarchal incursion and her declaration that the subdued voices do speak when it is prolonged beyond inhumanity. Her defiance to be clothed again is an act of protest and confrontation against tyrannical male hegemony, governmental corruption and asymmetrical power relations rendered in the form of Senanayak. Navleen Multani writes in the article "Poetics and Politics of Marginality in Mahasweta Devi's Breast Stories":

Devi interrogates the exclusion and marginalization through micro-narratives, etches out tension between the dispossessed and the powerful and produces emancipatory texts of rebellion. (Spivak, 2020, p. 2)

Dopdi despite being illiterate is politically conscious and operates shoulder-to-shoulder with Dulna in killing the atrocious landlords. She refuses to discontinue the fight and be a part of the betrayers like Shomai and Budhna and continues to salvage "... the pure unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi" (Spivak, 1981, p. 399). Anoushka Sinha in her article "Resistance as Embodies Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice"" writes that Draupadi is a direct victim of the repressive state apparatus and "... this repressive state apparatus maintains dominant ideology through the oppression of the marginalized—the other—whose identity hampers the process of homogenization and 'unification'" (2019, p. 153). The perennial hegemonizing tendency of the state is manifested by Senanayak, the army chief whose function is to safeguard the interest and its alliance in "... sustaining the status quo of subjugation" (ibid.: 154). As a clever officer he has learnt the art of suppressing the rebels. As a tribal woman she has been endowed with power to comradesly work with her comrades but this is not accepted within the larger fabric of politics, patriarchy and mainstream society. Thus, she is hunted and not just the reward of two hundred is declared for her arrest but also special-gender designed punishment.

Rape, in a patriarchal society is synonymous with the power of manhood. On the other hand, the 'rapability' of the woman's body is because it is believed that a woman's honour lies in her inviolate body. (Sen and Yadav, 2008, p. 244)

By discarding her dishonour, her nakedness she rises equal to the exploiters (all men are given special power in the form of uniform, status of army and police). She rises above the hierarchies that portend her to be a victim and refuses to fit within her femininity and the carefully tactful, strategic upper elite (as he only orders the rape of Dopdi and does not actually participate) and the reliable agent of the state, Senanayak is utterly confused. He is confronted by a fearless, blood-oozing, dark, arm-less and bruised woman. In subverting the role of a captive and a victim, Dopdi negotiates her identity of marginality, intended exclusion, exploitation and rewrites a narrative of resistance. She exposes the suppressive nature of political power. The ritualistic pouring of the water on the ground and tearing her piece of cloth with her teeth is an act of revealing the ugly face of the agencies of power. The story lays bare the nexus between socio-economic and political systems.

Amongst the poor, all the exploitation is vertical. Horizontally, the author posits class solidarity as the norm. As a part of this agenda, she shows men and women of

the lower classes/castes as helpful and supportive of each other. (Katyay, 1997, p.17)

Yantrana published in 1980 too exposes the plight, deprivation and exploitation of the tea workers in Darjeeling and Chandrabahadur emerges as a hero who confronts the hegemonic and hierarchical power structure operating in the tea gardens. He is an eighteen year old youth whose widowed mother too works in the tea garden. The tea gardens in Darjeeling were a colonial enterprise but even after independence they could not be freed of colonial prejudice, subjugation and exploitative management. Be it government owned or private leased estates, they continued the colonial pattern of suppression and oppression. The article by Girban Biswas, "A Tale of Two Leaves and A Bud (A Case Study Of The Beginning of Tea Industry In Cachar)" substantiates this that though some changes have occurred in the existing condition of the tea workers like improvement in wages, reduction in working hours, abolition of child labour, threat of sexual harassment on women and so on but after independence it was hoped

...that the workers who have passed through the most brutal period of suppression may be over and they would be freed from the bondage of slavery... but the combined forces of the planters, bureaucracy and their hirelings existed as before. (2006, p. 595)

The narrations on the tea workers' lives have brought out how they have never been able to assert their rights in the tea gardens and the fear of the managers and the management have governed them for centuries. Piya Chatterjee writes:

The postcolonial plantocracy constitutes a tiny elite of managers who are assisted by a small cadre of staff. As a small and tightly knit core, they enact an ideology of "cultivation" that is not only about literal labor on the landscape but also about the more ineffable and symbolic constructions of difference and power. (2001, p. 142)

Yantrana vents out this never ending years of subjection and subjugation that the tea garden workers are part of. This is manifested in their internalized servitude as well as in their economic, social and other spheres of life. Chandrabahadur's outrage is therefore, a reflection of the mass that has been kept under domination because the system in the tea gardens has the support of the government and its power. The novel testifies that the marginalized voices do speak when they are suppressed to an extent of intolerance. Chandrabahadur is a fighter born out of the prolonged repression, humiliation and strain borne out by the silenced workers. Like Dopdi he does not have anything else to aid him in his fight except his determination and body. In his resistance he wants other complacents too to shed off their servitude and speak against enslavement because tea bushes are not mere bread givers for the workers but as Chandrabahadur's grandfather says: "Closer to ours is your kinship with the tea gardens. Here in these tea gardens your grandfather's father became one with the soil" (Rai 1980, p. 2; Author's Translation).

Amidst constraints and through perseverance he passes matriculation. After much prayer and pleading before the 'malik' Bhim Samsher Rana, he gets a job of a clerk in the office but he is cautioned that he should work honestly and sincerely like his father Maanbahadur. The internalized slave in him compels him to say, "Yes Sir, the mercy of the master" (ibid.: 25; Author's Translation). But very soon he realizes the brunt of how much the enslaved psyche had dominated the masses. The life in the tea garden office as a 'babu' is that of a toy whose remote is in the hands of the 'malik'. That is why he outbursts, "Enslaved life! You will never get salvation" (Rai 1980, p. 32; Author's Translation).

Even after three years of service Chandrabahadur is not made permanent and deprived

of facilities like provident fund, ration, leaves and so on. In addition to that he is given warning that he should not go against the management in any form. Eventually he understands that the owners always run the tea gardens only to profit themselves. Thus begins the journey of Chandrabahadur's awakening regarding the exploitative management and the indirect support it receives from the government too. The latent rebel in him is awakened and he starts vehemently protesting against the high-handedness of the maliks and the system that is weaved around it. The owner-worker hierarchy starts diluting with Chandrabahadur's fearless intervention to interrogate the status of the workers. He questions the fundamental right to life, "worker is also a human being and has the right to live like a human" (ibid.: 39; Author's Translation). He is a great jolt in the face of fear and loyalty towards managers instilled in the colonized minds of the tea workers. When Bhim Samsher Rana orders his eviction from the tea garden he outrageously reacts, "Here in these gardens there is a century of history of our forefathers. The law from your pocket cannot remove me. I have the right to reside and survive here" (Rai 1980, p. 57; Author's Translation).

The author takes us to the harrowing truth about the life of the workers in the tea gardens. Chandrabahadur comes to understand the truth how and why his grandfather gave his sweat, blood, youth and entire life till his death to the tea bushes, why his mother had to give birth to him under the bushes, why his father's life was wasted like a boulder in the landslide, why his mother had to starve and not sleep enough at night while raising him up! When his father had been killed in the landslide his mother had received one hundred rupees from the malik to do the final rites. Chandrabahadur is aghast to learn that his father's life was worth only one hundred rupees. That is why he says, "Since we fear we have been robbed of the right to live, we have been taken away of our living quarters, we have been robbed of the meal from our mouth" (Rai 1980, p. 53; Author's Translation).

The practice of direct 'hattabahar' or eviction prevailed in the tea gardens in the past and still people do not have right over the lands where they reside. When the owner and the management alone fail to crush his determination, he is alleged in the false murder case of the manager Surendra Prasad through conspiracy and is imprisoned. The management buys the witnesses and hence it is proved in the court that Chandrabahadur threw a boulder and killed Surendra Prasad. All the evidences prove that he is the murderer. According to the Indian Penal Act 302 he is declared as a murderer and death sentence is announced. However, this gets deferred due to some of the members of the workers' union endeavouring for his release. Towards the end of the novel it is seen that continuous five years of torment cripple both of his hands and also his one leg has to be amputated due to sepsis. Not only that he is infected with tuberculosis too but till the end he shows an unwavering spirit. Abound with misery, torment and darkness yet he hopes for a new dawn. He is shifted to a sanatorium. At night he coughs, sometimes he is very restless and sometimes vomits clots of blood. But every day he opens the window and looks towards the east and when the nurse pulls his leg saying may be he is waiting for the tea, he answers, "No, I am waiting for the sunrise". He said with firm conviction as usual" (Rai 1980, p. 93; Author's Translation).

Chandrabahadur's life is full of challenges because he chooses to fight against a system that is dehumanizing, merciless and which reaps profit at the cost of denial of innumerable souls' basic amenities of life. Foucault is of the opinion that to challenge power is to detach it from the different forms of hegemony within which it operates. Power produces not only negative but positive force too and where there is power there is resistance as well. Dopdi and Chandrabahadur's readiness to combat through their bodies is an act of unmasking various types of hegemony that have been operating in the lives of these sections of the people who have been marginalized, deprived and denied. When there is no alternative

left to them they resist through their bodies. In both the texts body is an important medium— if it is a site of violence, it also produces counter force of resistance. Both in Asit Rai and Mahasweta Devi one comes to terms with the lived realities of the poor workers, tribals and their long chain of denial from the right to live as rightful citizens of the country. That is why Pramod K. Nayar too refers to the fact that nation building cannot be imagined in homogenous sense in his “Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction”:

There is no one history, no central figure, no geographical certainty to rely on when speaking of India. ‘India’ is multiple, fluid, amorphous, and can only be imagined into existence through fragmented memories and histories. (Nayar, 2008, p. 79)

References

- Baruah, M.C. (2002). “Reflections of “Draupadi” from the *Mahabharata* to Mahasweta Devi and Manipur.” *International Journal Of Innovative Research In Technology*, 8(10), 324-327.
- Biswas, G. (2006). “A Tale Of Two Leaves And A Bud (A Case Study Of The Beginning Of Tea Industry In Cachar).” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 66, 584-599.
- Chatterjee, P. 2001. *A Time for Tea Women Labor And Post/Colonial Politics On An India Plantation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Devi, M & Usha, G., (1997). *Rudali* (A. Katyal, Trans.), Seagull Books. (Original work published 1979).
- Multani, N. (2020) “Poetics and Politics of Marginality in Mahasweta Devi’s Breast Stories”, 1-22.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343054147_Poetics_and_Politics_of_Marginality_in_Mahasweta_Devi's_Breast_Stories
- Nayar, P.K. 2008. *Postcolonial Literature An Introduction*. Noida: Pearson Indian Education Services Pvt. Ltd.
- Raj, P.P.E (2018). “Female Body As Site Of Resistance In “Draupadi.” *International Journal Of Creative Research Thoughts*, 6(1), 281-284.
- Rai, A. 1980. *Yantrana*. Darjeeling: Sajha Pustak Prakashan.
- Sen, N & Nikhil Y. (Eds). 2008. *Mahasweta Devi An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Pencraft International.
- Sinha, A. (2019). “Resistance as Embodied Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” and “Behind the Bodice.” *Language, Literature and Interdisciplinary Studies*, 152-159.
- Spivak, G.C. (1981). “Draupadi” by Mahasweta Devi.” *Critical Inquiry*, 8(2), 381-402).

Bio-note

Rathika Subba works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Sonada Degree College, Darjeeling. Prior to this she worked at Surendranath College for Women, Kolkata. She has been teaching the UG students from 2019. She has completed her M.Phil in 2019 on Tea Garden Literature from Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan under the supervision of Professor Somdatta Mandal. She has co-authored a chapter titled “The Third Space in Tea Garden Literature: Revisiting Select Works from Darjeeling” in the volume *Darjeeling in Search of People’s History of the Hills* edited by Dinesh Chandra Ray and Srikanta Roy Chowdhury and published by Manohar Publishers. Her areas of interest are Postcolonial Literature, Indian English Literature and Tea Garden Literature.

**Voices of the Marginal: Comparative Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and Asit Rai's
*Yantrana***

Email Id: rathikasubba10@gmail.com