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Mitali R. Pati

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The complex rhetoric of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"¹ invites the reader into the text with its collage-like depiction of the confusing power struggles of post-colonial Indian society. The medley of voices in Mahasweta Devi's narrative is analogous to the babel of tongues and of political languages prevailing in post-colonial India. The protagonist Draupadi is a tribal, a young woman, a political extremist, and an outlaw with a price on her head. By allowing Draupadi to stand triumphant and defiant despite her brutal gang rape by soldiers after her capture, the narrative points to the need for changes in contemporary Indian society and politics.

The closing visual imagery of the narrative vividly opposes the black-skinned, naked, raped Draupadi with the white-clad army officer Senanayak who indirectly ordered the gang rape:

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her

palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation; '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 a bloody gob and says, 'There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter me--counter me--?*' Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (196).

In the above episode, Mahasweta Devi's subversive rhetoric juxtaposes masculist/ high caste/ bourgeois/ educated values together with female/ tribal/ underprivileged/ uneducated rhetoric in the historical context of the Naxalbari uprising², to expose the soullessness and corruption of sources of power in post-colonial India.

The various reiterations of

“counter” throughout the narrative and in the final episode suggest that Mahasweta Devi’s rhetorical device of using multiple voices--frequently ironic and/or parodic--generates several *counter-meanings* in Indian social and political contexts. To the uneducated Draupadi “encounter” and “counter” both have the same terrifying meaning:

No, tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will *counter* me. Let them.

. . . Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They countered him. When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. *Killed by police in an encounter . . . unknown male . . . age twenty-two* (192).

By exposing the protagonist’s fear of being caught between the loyalty to her political comrades and police brutality, the writer draws attention to the need for recognizing the sovereignty of the individual over all political systems. Mahasweta Devi writes: “Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics (Spivak 180).”

The depiction of the oppressive military officers Arjan Singh and Senanayak versus the uneducated, underprivileged, tribal woman Draupadi identifies both the class struggle as well as masculist versus feminist ideologies existing synchronically with semi-feudal racist attitudes and colonialist-capitalist values in post-colonial India. Marxist scholars have read the spread of colonialism in India as a change from semi-feudal government to capitalist subjection (Spivak 197). In “Draupadi” the post-colonial ruling classes are depicted as parodies of their colonial predecessors as they hunt the tribal revolutionaries:

One comes across hair-raising details in the eyewitness records put together on the people who are suspected of attacking police stations, stealing guns (since the snatchers are not invariably well educated, they sometimes say “give up your *chambers*” rather than give up your gun), killing grain brokers, landlords, money-lenders, law officers, and bureaucrats. A black-skinned couple ululated like police *sirens* before the episode. They sang jubilantly in a savage tongue, incomprehensible even to the Santals. Such as:

Samaray hijulenako mar
goekope
and,
Hende rambra keche keche
Pundi rambra keche keche
(188).

The rhetoric of the above passage is reminiscent of colonial despatches on "native" rebellions. Mahasweta Devi's trenchant irony further exposes the post-colonial ruling class's ignorance and fear of tribal revolutionaries:

Government procedure being as incomprehensible as the Male Principle in Sankhya philosophy or Antonioni's early films, it was Arjan Singh who was sent once again on *Operation Forest Jharkhani* . . . Arjan Singh fell for a bit into a *zombie* like state and finally acquired so irrational a dread of black-skinned people that whenever he saw a black person in a ball-bag, he swooned, saying 'they're killing me' (188)."

The narrative explores the Indian government's callousness toward the tribal peoples, the original inhabitants of the subcontinent:

The Special Forces . . . compelled quite a few Santals in the various districts of West Bengal to meet their Maker against their will. By the Indian Constitution, all human beings regardless of caste or creed, are sacred. Still, accidents like this do happen. Two sorts of reasons: (1), the underground couple's skill in self-concealment; (2) not merely the Santals but all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the Special Forces (187).

The writer's ironic tone points to the racism and ignorance which lead to such "accidents." Following colonial

(and Westernized) methods, Senanayak and his team research the unintelligible, even magical nature of the Santal couple's chant (188), and the meaning of Dulna's battle cry at the moment of his death:

What does "Ma-ho" mean? Is this a violent slogan in the tribal language? Even after much thought, the Department of Defense could not be sure. Two tribal-specialist types are flown in from Calcutta, and they sweat over the dictionaries put together by worthies such as Hoffmann-Jeffers and Golden-Palmer. Finally the omniscient Senanayak summons Chamru, the water carrier of the *camp*. He giggles when he sees the two specialists, scratches his ear with his "bidi", and says, the Santals of Maldah did say that when they began fighting at the time of King Gandhi! It's a battle cry. Who said "Ma-ho" here? Did someone come from Maldah (189)?

While the soldiers wait around Dulna's corpse in the forest hoping for Draupadi to come for her husband's body (much as a wild animal returns to seek its dead mate), the researchers decode the threatening chant:

When Senanayak hears that no one has come to take the corpse, he slaps his *anti-Fascist paperback* copy of *The Deputy* and shouts "What?" Immediately one of the tribal specialists runs in with a joy as naked and transparent as Archimedes' and says, "Get up, sir!

I have discovered the meaning of that “hendre rambra” stuff. It’s Mundari *language* (190).”

The inability of the educated and privileged class to comprehend tribal language exemplifies the cultural and philosophical differences that prevail within the complicated class structures of post-colonial Indian society. Mahasweta Devi’s depiction of Draupadi and of her torture are extended metaphors of the historical subjection and dispossession of the tribal peoples of India by both the Hindus and Western colonizers.³ Draupadi’s gang rape is symbolic of centuries’ old methods of brutal tortures being inflicted upon “rebellious” low class/caste men and women in remote semi-feudal agricultural communities in India.⁴

The fight over water in which Dulna and Draupadi maim and kill their oppressive employer is almost a stock situation in Indian commercial films. This “cultural cliché” is transformed by Mahasweta Devi’s rhetoric into a violent episode which encapsulates the continuing struggle against feudal patterns of class/caste oppression in rural India:

No water anywhere, drought in Birbhum. Unlimited water at Sur ja Sahu’s house, clear as a crow’s eye

. . . Have I not given water to the village?

You’ve given it to your kin Bhagunal.

Don’t you get water?

No. The untouchables don’t get water.

The quarrel began there. In the drought, human patience catches easily. Satish and Jugal from the village and that young gentleman, was Rana his name? said a landowning moneylender won’t give a thing, put him down.

Sur ja Sahu’s house was surrounded at night, Sur ja Sahu had brought out his gun. Sur ja was tied up with cow rope. His whitish eyeballs turned and turned, he was incontinent again and again. Dulna had said, I’ll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labor to repay the debt.

Dopdi had said, His mouth watered when he looked at me. I’ll put out his eyes (193).

Draupadi’s name itself is ironic and illustrative of her difference from the culture of the majority of Indians. Spivak points out:

The ancient Draupadi is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India. The tribes predate the Aryan invasion. They have no heroic Sanskrit names . . . this pious, domesticated Hindu name was given Dopdi at birth by her mistress, in the usual mood of

benevolence felt by the oppressor's wife to the tribal bond servant (Spivak 183).

Spivak, however, briefly states that "Dopdi is not romanticized by Mahasweta" (Spivak 184). One tends to disagree, because Mahasweta Devi's rhetoric clearly depicts her as a heroine among the Santal community. Draupadi is a peasant leader to her Naxalite revolutionary comrades, even though according to the semi-feudal social codes of Indian agricultural communities she is a criminal and a villain.

Draupadi's flight into the jungle is a romantic return to her natural "roots," for many tribal peoples of India live in forested areas. They live off of the forest and its natural resources. Draupadi's flight is also a symbolic reminder of the ancient so-called Aryan invasion of India which drove the Austro-Asiatic tribes into the forests, and possibly dispossessed them of their lands:

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns toward 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 (195).

Draupadi's call is reminiscent of the call of the tiger, the romantic, fearsome, and (formerly) much-hunted denizen of the Indian jungle. The cordoning and killing of Dulna

and the baiting of Draupadi (which fails) is similar to the upper class Indian (and Western colonial) sport of "shikar" (hunt). Tigers were frequently cornered and shot when they emerged from the dense foliage to drink water or to eat the hunters' bait. In this hunting metaphor, the narrator's oblique rhetoric points to the inhumane treatment of tribals by the Special Forces. In contrast to the tiger, now a carefully protected species, tribal men and women seeking social justice (such as the right to an adequate water supply) become hunted creatures fleeing along forest trails.

Mahasweta Devi's narrative stops rather than ends with Draupadi's naked and defiant confrontation of Senanayak. Despite her will to fight back, one cannot see Draupadi as wholly victorious. In terms of the plot, class distinctions as well as patriarchy and its privileges ultimately prevail over left-wing ideologies. While the tribal women rebel Draupadi is brutally raped by soldiers, the male student-leader-party theoretician Arijit stays hidden and "safe" (195). However, Draupadi's strength and resistance remain heroic. She is characteristic of Mahasweta Devi's socially underprivileged women protagonists in "(her) courage, (her) power to resist, to fight back."⁵

NOTES

¹Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi" translated from Bengali by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New

York: Methuen, 1987) 187-196. All citations are from this translation

²Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* 181, writes:

In the spring of 1967, there was a successful peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal . . . The target of these movements was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law. Indeed, one might say that legislation seemed to have an eye to its own future circumvention.

³Mahasweta Devi, Interview with Mitali R. Pati, Calcutta, July 2, 1991 (unpublished). As a lifelong activist for tribal welfare, Mahasweta Devi has thoroughly studied several centuries of the history of tribal relations with the government. She finds that the oppression of tribals and Harijans (untouchables) “goes on forever in rural India” because rural India is both feudal and oppressive.

⁴Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 183-184 views Draupadi’s rape differently:

In the epic, Draupadi’s legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory. She provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men, the efficient cause of the crucial battle . . . Mahasweta’s story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi--in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.

⁵Devi, Interview with Pati, Calcutta, July 2, 1991 (unpublished)