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Defiance and the speakability of rape: Decolonizing trauma studies in Mahasweta Devi's short fiction

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Abstract

This article considers traumatic representations of violence in the stories of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi that do not readily fit into trauma studies discourses which emphasise the aporia and unspeakability of trauma. Instead, the protagonists of these stories gesture towards defiance and agency in the face of trauma, thereby calling for justice and social change. Such portrayals offer us opportunities to decolonize cultural trauma theory by focusing on the unexpected arising of agency and empowerment from victims of gendered violence. The article explores the complex ways in which the trope of rape operates in Devi's work and posits that it is used by Devi to empower her female protagonists and make them powerful critiques of patriarchal systems of exploitation. In doing so, the article argues, these stories also decolonize established discourses of trauma. In "Draupadi", the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is a tribal revolutionary who is arrested and gang-raped in custody. In "Behind the Bodice", Gangor, a Dalit woman, is gang-raped by policemen. In these stories, rape functions at two levels: firstly, it functions as a critique of the stark reality and extent of the violence perpetrated daily on the bodies of women; secondly, it works as a trope in which the violation of the woman's body becomes symptomatic of the violation of the land and its oppressed people by the ruling elite under decolonization. Thus, rape in Devi's fiction can be read allegorically as a critique from within of nationalism and decolonization. By constituting the female subaltern as a complex figure of femininity whose body is not simply the site of exploitation and torture, but a transformative figure of resistance, Devi's fiction radically destabilizes the basic premise of female vulnerability and the violent objectification of women in the context of rape as well as the expected traumatic aftermath.

Keywords

Mahasweta Devi, gender, rape, Gayatri Spivak, subaltern, trauma studies, tribals

What is in a body, she thought. It is but a shell. No, it is me. I am my body.

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(Collen, 1995: 150–151)

> The great thing about being human is our ability to face adversity down by refusing to be defined by it, refusing to be no more than its agent or its victim.
>
> (Achebe, 2009: 22–23)

Introduction

In the spring/summer of 2008, the journal *Studies in the Novel* carried a special issue on the postcolonial trauma novel in which the editors, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, called for "theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing post-colonialism as a post traumatic cultural formation" (2008: 1). They positioned this as a corrective to the Eurocentric bias of much of trauma studies (such as the work done by Cathy Caruth (1996), Shoshana Felman (1992), Geoffrey Hartman (1996), and Dominick LaCapra (1994, 2013) among others). The special issue's purpose was to critique the central tenets of trauma theory which, they argued, are exclusively based on discourses originating in a Euro-American context, and to question its application to the postcolonial condition. Craps and Buelens begin their introduction by questioning the apolitical and ahistorical textuality of trauma studies. They argue that contrary to the stated purpose of trauma studies, which is to promote cross-cultural ethical engagement, "by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world" (Craps and Beulens, 2008: 2). The special issue therefore attempts a "rapprochement" between trauma theory and postcolonial criticism. Yet the contributors conclude that they seriously question whether trauma in its current form "provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" (Rothberg, 2008: 226).

In her 2011 article, Irene Visser further studies the relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial studies and calls for a radical rethinking of several concepts of trauma theory, such as its lack of historical particularity, its transmissibility and its understanding of collective trauma, if it is to be "postcolonized" (2011: 279). In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, Stef Craps (2013) critiques the Eurocentric bias and modernist aesthetic of mainstream trauma theory. Ananya Jahanara Kabir has also called for "'provincializing' the 'Europe' within the heart of trauma theory" by proposing an affect-mediated approach to postcolonial trauma studies (2014: 64). Similarly, Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone attempt to chart the future of trauma studies characterizing its interdisciplinarity as a "knot" or assemblage of "representation, the past, the self, the political and suffering" (2014: 4) in their edited collection *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Another collection entitled *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* (Ward, 2015) attempts to explore new ways of understanding postcolonial traumas. Emphasizing the plurality and heterogeneity of postcolonial *traumas*, the key concerns of the essays (as suggested by the book's subtitle) include dealing with memories of trauma, the difficulties of narrating traumatic events, and forms of resistance to trauma. Many of the essays in the collection engage with the

continuity of historical traumas which is of particular relevance to the postcolonial context where decolonization is often replaced by forms of neocolonialism.

Inspired by these interventions into trauma theory and postcolonial studies, this article considers traumatic representations of violence in two short stories written by the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi that do not readily fit into the mainstream discourses of trauma studies. Such discourses emphasize the aporia and unspeakability of trauma, which are key terms in Western trauma theory. Cathy Caruth's work (1996) hinges on the notion of aporia or an unresolvable paradox where the traumatic event is seared into the psyche, yet paradoxically does not appear in conscious memory. This leads to a failure of language in articulating the traumatic experience. Consequently, Western trauma theorists privilege the high modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, non-linearity, and anti-narrative as the only mode for trauma narratives. Rape, as a particular form of traumatizing experience, struggles with its own questions of representation and articulation. Visualizing rape may invite the scopophilic gaze, while speaking about it may call into question the victim's lack of agency and thereby her victimhood. Seeking to dismantle established binaries in rape narratives such as passivity and agency, master and victim, articulation of truth and powerlessness, the editors of *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation* seek to subvert such narratives and "begin to position the rape 'victim' outside of a hierarchical structure in which they are inevitably disenfranchised" (Gunne and Thompson, 2010: 11). Mahasweta Devi's stories, with their acutely graphic depictions of violated protagonists who remain fiercely articulate in the face of their degradation, offer such subverted rape narratives. Instead of the aporetic aesthetic so valued by mainstream trauma theory, we find in Devi's stories women who gesture towards defiance and agency in the face of trauma, thereby calling for retributive justice and social change. Such portrayals, I contend, highlight some of the postcolonial critiques of literary and cultural trauma theory and offer us opportunities to decolonize cultural trauma theory by focusing on agency and empowerment instead of the unspeakability of trauma.

Considering Mahasweta Devi's writings also locates us in a particular South Asian context of traumatic histories, including gender oppressions. While valuable work has been done on the psychosomatic effects of violence and trauma on the colonized by Francophone writers like Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961) and Albert Memmi (1965), much of this is limited in terms of gender, focusing as it does on masculine impotence and the recovery of male power. When considering the history of gendered violence in South Asia, women are often viewed as sexualized objects of violence or as the objects of permissible forms of violence in patriarchal societies. Considerable scholarship exists by South Asian feminists like Nivedita Menon (2004), Lata Mani (1998), Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1999) to name a few, on varied forms of patriarchal violence against women such as bride burning, female infanticide, sati, domestic violence, honour killings, and rape. Devi's work offers us the opportunity to consider the complex concatenation of patriarchal, nationalist, and caste-based forms of violence and their traumatic consequences in postcolonial India.

Rape, as a form not only of gendered violence but also of ethnic, religious, and nationalistic violence perpetrated on the female body, has a complex and troubling history in the Partition of India. Thousands of women, both Hindu and Muslim, were abducted and

brutally raped during the country's partitioning in 1947. There was little possibility of redress for these women. Many of the abducted and violated women, facing the exigencies of survival, chose to build new lives with their violators rather than return to their families. Still others were, often forcibly, restored to their families. The stories of these victims and survivors remain for the most part shrouded in silence. Priya Kumar points to the surprising lack of even a single testimonial account of a victim speaking of her own violation amid the plethora of historical work on oral histories of the Partition (2008: 149). While the unspeakability of rape has long been established, more recent trauma scholarship argues for bearing witness and "speaking out" as necessary for survival. The act of telling is seen as cathartic, necessary, and therapeutic. In the context of the Holocaust, for example, Dori Laub points to the survivor's "imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Felman and Laub, 1992: 78). However, citing cultural contingencies, Partition scholars such as Priya Kumar (2008) and Deepika Bahri (1999) have argued against this imperative.[1] Instead, they have chosen to read these women's silences not in simplistic terms as symptomatic of passivity but rather as imperative given the exigencies of survival confronting these women. The aporetic aesthetic and fragment theory so privileged in Western trauma theory has proven to be very useful in analysing South Asian rape narratives, particularly traumatic narratives of Partition and wartime rape (see for example Yusin (2009) and Kabir (2005)). Radhika Mohanram has pointed to the convergence of trauma theory and postcolonial theory, particularly with regard to the issues of fragmentation and silence (2011: 918).

In the post-rape depiction of women in Devi's fiction we find neither unspeakability nor an imperative silence surrounding the trauma. Instead Devi presents a bold articulation of the traumatizing violation along with a powerful accusation and condemnation of the structures of patriarchy, caste, and class that enable such violations in decolonized India. This is not the kind of testimonial and self-therapeutic "speaking up" proposed by Felman and Laub, but rather a fierce critique, sharpened by rage and resilience, against the pervasiveness and depravity of the violence wrought by the decolonizing elite upon the marginalized populations in India. The female subaltern in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi is a complex figure of femininity. Her body is the site of exploitation and torture, yet she becomes transformed into a figure of resistance. The female protagonists of several of Devi's stories are brutally raped and tortured. However, they emerge ultimately either as proud and resilient, challenging the very agent of their degradation, or they die in extreme deprivation, offering a fierce indictment of the very structures that exploited them. Mahasweta Devi's fiction radically destabilizes the basic premise of female vulnerability and the violent objectification of women in the context of rape as well as the expected traumatic aftermath. In this article, I explore the complex ways in which the metaphor of rape operates in Devi's work. I argue that Devi uses the metaphor to empower her female protagonists and make them powerful critiques of patriarchal and neocolonial systems of exploitation. In doing so, these stories also decolonize established discourses of trauma by positing an alternative category of affect and response — one of resilience, fierce rage, and defiance. In his essay, "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" David Lloyd writes: "Trauma entails violent intrusion and a sense of utter objectification that annihilates the person as subject or agent" (2000: 214). In Western

trauma theory, trauma, whether it is caused by colonialism, war, or sexual violence, always leads to the utter annihilation of subjectivity, a pathological fragmentation of the self. Critiquing the primacy given to the neurobiological features of trauma in mainstream trauma theory, Michelle Balaev has argued that the "unspeakability of trauma can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum and neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies" (2012: 19). Devi's protagonists show no evidence of neurobiological fragmentation as a consequence of rape, nor do they have any concern for cultural injunctions against speaking about their violation. In boldly challenging the neocolonial agents of their torture and violation, these women provide yet another alternative model that runs counter to and cannot be addressed by the existing categories of mainstream trauma theory.

Rape and the female subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's fiction

Much of Devi's fiction focuses on the plight of the dispossessed in a decolonized nation. The delineation of subaltern life and resistance also becomes for Devi the site for her excoriation of the processes of decolonization. Decolonization in India, having been led by a nationalist bourgeoisie, becomes a continuation of colonization for populations such as the tribal peoples, who have neither been included in the elite historiography of nationalist resistance nor benefitted from the fruits of decolonization. Instead they have been further marginalized and pauperized by the government, while their land has been illegally usurped in the name of industrial development. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested, in Devi's fiction, "Empire" and "Nation" are indistinguishable for the subaltern woman (1987: 78). The subject of rape in her fiction is not an unlikely one given that tribals are the protagonists of her stories. In an interview with Spivak, Devi says of this beleaguered group in India: "Among the tribals insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society" (Devi, 1995: xviii). One of the causes of the great Santhal revolt of 1855–1856 was the raping of tribal women by European railway officers (Guha, 1983: 4). Though the rebellion was brutally quashed, it proved to be the precursor to the Rebellion of 1857, which many have called the first war of independence in colonial India. Time and again in Devi's fiction, sexual violence is exposed as the signifier of the impotence of masculinist social power, rather than as the "reality" of that power. In her short story "Draupadi" (in *Breast Stories*; Devi, 1998), the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is a tribal revolutionary who is arrested and gang-raped in custody. The protagonist of "The Hunt" (*Imaginary Maps*; Devi, 1995), Mary Oraon, is not raped but she anticipates her own rape and murders the intended rapist. In "Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Pichhe" (*Breast Stories*; Devi, 1998), Gangor, a Dalit woman, is gang-raped by policemen. Finally, in "Douloti, the Bountiful" (*Imaginary Maps*; Devi, 1995), Douloti is a mere child when she is sold into prostitution to repay the debt of her father who is a bonded slave. Rape, therefore, functions at two levels in Devi's fiction. At one level, it functions as a critique of the stark reality and extent of the violence perpetrated daily on the bodies of women. On another level, it works as a trope or concept metaphor where the violation of the woman's body becomes symptomatic of the violation of the land and its oppressed people by the ruling elite under decolonization. At this level, rape in Devi's fiction can be read allegorically as an

attack from within on nationalism and the failure of decolonization to reach the marginalized tribal populations of India. However, it is important to note that even while functioning as national allegory, rape in her fiction does not end up becoming reductive but rather remains an unflinching assertion of resistance and defiance. I will discuss rape, defined for the purposes of this article as the threat or perpetration of sexual violence on the woman's body, in two stories by Mahasweta Devi — "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice". I will argue that Devi uses the subject of rape not only to critique patriarchy but also to lambast the internal colonization perpetrated by the ruling elite in the postcolonial era. I also read Devi's portrayal of these traumatized and brutalized women not as victims but rather as defiant and accusatory, and her envisioning of a post-rape afterlife for them as posing a challenge to Eurocentric trauma theory.

Devi's use of rape as a concept metaphor and national allegory does not prevent her from representing rape in all its horror and reality. In this her writing differs from phallocentric discourses of nationalism, wherein rape is used as a metaphor of exploitation, and the violence and reality of the rape of real women are elided (Suleri, 1992: 16–17). Devi's stories contain very graphic descriptions of the woman's body after the rape and a complete absence of any "shame and humiliation" on the part of the women portrayed. Through such portrayals, Devi forbids the subsuming of women's exploitation and violence under issues of decolonization, such as the marginalization of tribal populations — even while the resonance of rape calls attention to the trauma of state oppression. By refusing shame, the rebel Draupadi renders the state culpable. Shame and humiliation are powerful concepts in the South Asian context and rape has a long history of being used as a punitive measure in ethnic and caste conflicts. Sexual violence is wreaked with the explicit intention of inducing shame and humiliation, and thereby assert power and superiority not only over the victims of sexual violence but, by extension, over the community as a whole. In her depiction of women who feel no shame or humiliation as a consequence of rape, Devi is thus able to foreground and critique — simultaneously and with equal power — both types of violence: namely, the violence perpetrated on women's bodies in the name of patriarchal power and the violence perpetrated upon the marginalized communities. Rape is no longer merely a concept metaphor or symbol for Devi's purposes. It becomes instead a means for her to impugn processes of exploitation along caste and class lines in the period of decolonization, and to discuss how these are practised on the bodies of women as well as on the land. Devi's object of critique is caste, class, and gender oppression perpetrated by the ruling classes, particularly upon the disempowered tribal populations. By making the rapists non-tribal men who are also members of the ruling classes, Devi strengthens her obloquy. As Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde have pointed out, the context of Devi's stories is often "the conflict between two master narratives, one the official story of the decolonization of India, of freedom and the abolishment of the caste system, the second [...] of Masters, of caste, of money, of bonded labour, whose debts are passed from father to children" (1998: 350). Devi powerfully uses literary realism to tell these stories and to shine a spotlight on the systemic exploitation of the dispossessed underclasses in postcolonial India.

Devi's protagonists offer us models of individual female agency in the face of traumatic experiences. Thus her stories can be interpreted as answering Irene Visser's call for agency and empowerment to be incorporated in trauma's aftermath if cultural trauma

theory is to be decolonized (2011: 279). The representation of the female figure in these stories reiterates the politics of resistance. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan attempts an exploration of the "different ways in which rape and the raped woman enter representation as the subject of narrative, as well as the different politics they engender within feminism" (Sunder Rajan, 1994: 61). She concludes that feminist texts of rape counter narrative determinism by structuring a *post-rape* narrative of survival, by literalizing rather than mystifying the representation of rape, and finally by implying that the cost of rape is higher than the loss of female selfhood. Sunder Rajan suggests that in these ways, narratives can develop a feminist "thematics of liberation" (1994: 77). Instead of aporia and unspeakability in the face of traumatic brutalization, it is this resistance and liberation that is embodied in the figure of the female subaltern of Devi's fiction. None of her stories reify female victimhood and there is no mystification of the concept of rape, which is acknowledged in starkly brutal terms as the very premise on which the narrative is built. The women in these stories are never objectified by the act of rape and neither is their suffering spectacularized. Instead they retain their subjectivity even after the rape. In this way, male desire is decentred and Sunder Rajan's "thematics of liberation" is structured around the figure of the female protagonist. Devi does not stop at the decentring of male desire; her stories destabilize and radically revise the basic assumption of male power and female vulnerability by often portraying the raped woman as proud and defiant. Women like Draupadi (in "Draupadi") and Gangor (in "Behind the Bodice") have a certain strength and magnetism of personality which are reflected in their physicality even when that physicality has been violated. While I do not wish in any way to downplay or detract attention from the exploitation and victimhood of the gendered subaltern in "Draupadi", I am in agreement with Dipti Misri's suggestion that this story is strikingly able to imagine the crisis of its climax and Draupadi's subversion of all dominant perceptions of passive victimhood, as "a successful moment of resistance" (2014: 119).

"Draupadi": The female counter offensive

"Draupadi" is the story of Dopdi Mejhen,[2] a tribal, female revolutionary. She is the organizer and leader of a band of peasant workers in the Naxalite Rebellion of 1971.[3] She and her group have eluded the Indian soldiers for six years. Her husband has already been captured and murdered. As the soldiers close in on her, she vows not to betray her comrades or lead the soldiers to them. She is finally apprehended in the forest, gang-raped, and tortured. In Devi's post-rape narrative, Draupadi insists on remaining publicly naked and degraded before her rapist, "Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (Devi, 1998: 36). When questioned by Senanayak, the man who ordered her rape by saying "Make her. Do the *needful*" (Devi, 1998: 34, emphasis in original), she laughs and derisively refers to herself saying she is "The object of your search [...] You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me up?" (Devi, 1998: 36). These words convey her pride and the resilience of her spirit; they fiercely disallow any attempt on the part of her audience or the reader to view her ravaged body as a spectacle. She is not one to be pitied but rather to be feared. While the rape was an attempt to punish Draupadi for her revolutionary activities, at the end of the story it is Senanayak who is humiliated:

> 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 round and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *kounter*[4] me — come on, *kounter* 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. (Devi, 1998: 36–37, emphasis in original)

The inexplicability ("Senanayak simply cannot understand") of Draupadi's "indomitable laughter", her threatening black body, and her "terrifying, sky splitting and sharp [...] ululation" combine to create an image very unlike the disempowered, subjugated, raped woman of phallocentric discourses or the aporetic victim of trauma. Instead of an objectified victim lacking any agency, we are confronted by a defiant Draupadi, bitterly assailing the agent of her degradation. Although Senanayak does not commit Draupadi's rape himself, by ordering her rape he has become complicit in the act. Rather than reassert the potency of Senanayak's masculinity, the rape (and in particular Dopdi's reaction to it) has rendered him impotent. Dopdi asserts that he is not man enough for her to be ashamed of her nakedness in his presence. Ironically enough, while he had forcibly stripped her in order to degrade her, he now wants her to clothe herself. To him, her naked and battered body, coupled with her defiant gesture, is a cruel reminder *not* of his masculine power, but of his impotence. Dopdi standing naked before him forces him to acknowledge the horrific consequences of his actions. Finally, the breasts, often coded as erotic objects (or objects of maternal nurture), are transformed in this case, into objects of torture and revenge. Put differently, Dopdi turns the terrible wounds of her "mangled" breasts into a counter-offensive. Analysing this scene, Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson argue that by "speaking from Dopdi's narrative point of view, her brutalized body is invested with agency even while the violence of the attack is foregrounded" (2010: 9). While drawing attention to Draupadi's agency, Devi simultaneously reminds us of the violent oppression encountered daily by women like her.

It is significant that Devi's protagonist is named Dopdi, a corrupt form of Draupadi, who is the mythical heroine of the ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. In fact, Devi refers to her protagonist as Dopdi through the initial sections of the story (except when she is referring to official documentation of Dopdi as a revolutionary). However, after her rape and torture, she is called Draupadi. Devi seems to be suggesting that Dopdi's character attains mythic and heroic proportions *after* the rape and, I would argue, as a result of the transformative nature of rape.[5] Draupadi is the proud heroine of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. She has five husbands, all of whom must share her equally. Her figure plays a central role in a crucial scene of the epic when her eldest husband gambles everything, including her, in a game of dice. He loses her to the enemy who begins to pull at Draupadi's sari to disrobe her. Draupadi silently prays to Lord Krishna, who answers

her prayers by clothing her infinitely. Her honour is saved and she cannot be publicly stripped and degraded. Draupadi's desire for revenge leads to the extended and fierce battle delineated in the epic.

In Devi's rewriting of this episode, the men rape Draupadi, but in the end she refuses to clothe herself and insists on remaining naked and degraded. She no longer needs a male deity to rescue her. In her foreword to Devi's story, Spivak writes:

> It would be a mistake, I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is (as heroic as) Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi — written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power — could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. (Devi, 1998: 11)

Thus, by invoking Draupadi's story Devi invokes notions of masculine power and female honour, which are then promptly destabilized in the figure of the raped Dopdi who has (and needs) no male god to rescue her and refuses to clothe herself. For the first time the abuser cowers before the object of his violence. Although Dopdi is not armed, her proud and vengeful spirit make Senanayak terribly afraid. Dopdi scorns his manhood because he has failed miserably in his masculine duty of preserving the sexual honour of women.[6] In India's tribal cultures, a woman's body is not simply a female body but is also representative of her honour as well as the honour of her family and her community. Salman Rushdie writes, "In honor-and-shame cultures like those of India and Pakistan, male honor resides in the sexual probity of women, and the 'shaming' of women dishonors all men" (Rushdie, 2005: n.p.). Given these connotations, a popular form of police brutality in rural areas in India is the stripping and parading of women since this implies a shaming not only of the women, but of the entire village or community.[7] It is the duty of the men of the village to preserve the women's honour and thereby preserve the honour of the people. Thus the exposing of a woman's body is an act of shame and dishonour not because a woman's body is something she is ashamed of but because it represents so much more than just her body. So, when Dopdi refuses to clothe herself she is not shaming herself, but instead posing an affront to Senanayak's masculinity. Since he has failed in his duty as a man, she is no longer ashamed to be naked before him. Devi "denies the rapists the power to shame their victim" (Gunne and Thompson, 2010: 9). Earlier in the story Dopdi had reflected with pride on her forefathers who "stood guard over their women's blood in black armor" (Devi, 1998: 31). Dopdi's tortured and bleeding body becomes a severe indictment of masculine power and its impotence. In her reading of Draupadi's story in the *Mahabharata*, Sunder Rajan points out:

> the tautology of the virtuous woman who is saved because she is worthy of being saved has its inexorable logic: raped women, that is, those who are *not* saved, were unworthy. We can admire the feminism of Draupadi's exceptional salvation only at the cost of the misogyny of that logic. (1999: 338, emphasis in original)

In Devi's appropriation of Draupadi's story, the protagonist *is* raped but is *not* rendered unworthy by the rape. She must seek her salvation in the resources of her own spirit, rather than in a male god who finds her "worthy of being saved". Spivak has interpreted the concluding moment of the story as "the place where male leadership

stops" (Devi, 1998: 11). Draupadi asserts herself by challenging the man responsible for her rape and rendering him speechless. The "voice of male authority also fades [...]. The army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, What is this?" (1998: 12). Crucially, Senanayak is rendered speechless while Draupadi claims what Pickering and Kehde have called "a space of enunciation" (1998: 343) as she boldly asserts the right to speak of her degradation and challenges his masculinity.

Working as a revolutionary, the speech act is particularly significant for Dopdi since it is associated with betrayal in the story. When contemplating what she might do if she is tortured, she concludes: "[I]f mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue" (1998: 32). Repeated assertions against betrayal through the act of speaking — "Nothing must be told" (1998: 31), "Not a word must be said" (1998: 32) — highlight the importance of the speech act. Dopdi pays a heavy price for her silence and loyalty to her comrades. She refuses to divulge any information when she is questioned and so she is raped and brutalized by the guards under Senanayak's orders to "Make her. Do the *needful*" (1998: 34, emphasis in original). Determined not to even ask for water, "she catches her lower lip in her teeth" when she feels "incredible thirst" (1998: 34). The self-imposed injunction against speaking is powerfully reversed at the end of the story when Dopdi, naked with blood pouring from her vagina, insists on speaking "in a voice that is terrifying, sky-splitting, and sharp as her ululation" (1998: 36) while the instigator of her torture is "terribly afraid" (1998: 37) and rendered speechless at having to confront the violent consequences of his orders. On seeing Dopdi he is at a loss for words: "What is this? He is about to cry, but stops" (1998: 36). Instead of unspeakability and aporia, so often identified as the consequences of trauma, we have a silenced and afraid perpetrator and a clear-headed, defiant victim of trauma who insists on speaking and being heard.

Elaine Scarry (1985) famously noted that torture completely destroys the individual's capacity for language and articulation. The victim of torture is reduced to a speechless state where all that can be uttered are groans and cries. In keeping with this view, mainstream trauma theory signals toward an unspeakable void when it comes to the literary representation of trauma. This notion of the failure to articulate traumatic experiences in a linear, coherent narrative, has been somewhat revised in the idea of "narrative repair" proposed by Arthur Frank (1995), Hilde Lindeman Nelson (2001), and others, where the capacity for telling one's story coherently is reclaimed. However, mainstream trauma theory does not account for narratives like Devi's where the victim's capacity for telling her story is never lost. In the post-rape narrative, instead of an unspeakable void or a healing narrative, we are left with "a powerful 'subject,' who, still using the language of sexual 'honour,' can derisively call herself 'the object of your search,' whom the author can describe as a terrifying superobject — 'an unarmed target.'" (1998: 11). If Devi emphasizes speakability through Dopdi's depiction in "Draupadi", she foregrounds visuality in delineating the equally articulate and fiercely vengeful Gangor in "Behind the Bodice" who unflinchingly calls for her ravaged body to be seen.

"Behind the Bodice": The politics of violence and dismemberment

Mahasweta Devi alludes to a song from a popular Hindi film in the title of her story *Choli ke Pichhe* or "Behind the Bodice":

> Choli ke pichhe kya hai? Choli ke pichhe . . .
> Chunri ke nichhe kya hai? chunri ke nichhe . . .
> Choli me dil hai mera,
> Chunri me dil hai mera
> Yeh dil mein doongi yaar ko.
> What lies behind the bodice? Behind the bodice . . .
> What lies behind the scarf? Behind the scarf . . .
> My heart lies behind the bodice
> My heart lies behind the scarf
> This heart I'll give to my friend. (my translation)

The words of the popular song "Choli ke pichhe" from the Hindi film *Khalnayak* ("The Villain"; Ghai, 1993), elide and therefore erase the physicality and sexuality of the female body and draw attention instead to the woman's beating heart — the site of a desexualized love. The titillation aroused in the male viewer by the image of Bollywood's most beautiful and sexiest heroine, Madhuri Dixit, gyrating to the rhythm of the song and asking with wide-eyed querulousness, "Choli ke pichhe kya hai?"[8] ("What lies behind the bodice?") is belied in the very next line of the song "Choli me dil hai mera . . ." ("My heart lies behind the bodice . . .").

This song generated much furore and many heated debates about the "corruption" of Indian culture. Several social groups consisting primarily of self-declared moral upkeepers of Indian culture sought a legal stay order banning the song. In her article on the debates surrounding the song, Monika Mehta quotes from a legal petition filed by R. P. Chugh, an advocate and a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporter, alleging that the song "is obscene, defamatory to women community [*sic*] and is likely to incite the commission of offence. The song is grossly indecent and is being sung through cassettes at public places, annoying the people at large, the undersigned specially" (Mehta, 2001: n.p.).[9] In an ironic re-enactment of the song itself, the debate provoked by the song also disallowed any discussion of the female body. In the debate, the covert reference to a woman's breasts suggested in the line "Choli ke pichhe kya hai" becomes the subject of attack by those seeking to preserve Indian tradition and culture. The exposure of the breast or even an allusion to its very existence will result in cultural degradation.

Devi alludes to this song in the title of her story "Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Pichhe", and uses the concept metaphor of the breast to censure gender oppression and police violence in the democratic state. "Behind the Bodice" is the story of Gangor, a Dalit woman and a migrant labourer. Dalit women occupy the lowest position in the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender in India. Mostly uneducated and paid considerably less

than their male counterparts, these women form the majority of migrant landless labourers and scavengers. They are often forced into prostitution and exploited in other ways by their landlords and by law enforcement agencies. A report compiled by Human Rights Watch documents "the use of sexual abuse and other forms of violence against Dalit women as tools by landlords and the police to inflict political 'lessons' and crush dissent and labour movements within Dalit communities [...] Dalit women have also been arrested and raped in custody as a means of punishing their male relatives who are hiding from the police" (Narula, 1999: 166). In Devi's story, the Dalit woman, Gangor, is photographed by Upin Puri, a freelance photojournalist. After the photos are circulated, Gangor does not behave like the fallen woman that she is now perceived to be. The police interpret this as her taunting them with her sexuality. She is ultimately gang-raped by the police; her breasts are hacked off and she is forced to turn to prostitution.

In *Behind the Bodice*, Devi connects visuality and trauma through the figure of Upin Puri whose photographic gaze is transformed into a scopophilic one as he works to objectify Gangor's body. It has been argued that due to the failure and even destruction of language in the face of physical pain, contemporary trauma has been conceived through the compulsive repetition of "the recurrent image, the unbidden flashback that abolishes time and reimmerses you in the visual field of the inaugurating traumatic instant" (Lockhurst, 2008: 147). In Devi's story, however, the photograph does not record the inaugurating traumatic instant; instead it arguably leads to the traumatic act itself. Therefore, in this story we have a strange but powerful reversal. Rather than the image standing in and speaking for the unspeakable traumatic act, the victim remains articulate and resilient. Meanwhile the author of the image becomes traumatized, haunted by his work of art and his own unwitting role in causing the traumatic act. As a photojournalist in a postcolonial state, Upin's role might be seen as important in documenting the abuse and resulting trauma of the underprivileged. Instead, he unwittingly becomes the agent of that abuse and comes to be traumatized by Gangor's rape himself.

Upin photographs Gangor incessantly, trying to capture the "authentic" beauty of her breasts. His photos of her are described as follows:

> A highbreasted rural woman sits slack with her breast shoved into an infant's mouth. The breast is covered with the end of her cloth. The same girl is walking with many girls carrying water on her head. Breasts overflowing like full pitchers. (Devi, 1998: 143)

Whether photographed as a young mother or a girl carrying water on her head, Gangor's breasts (and not she herself) form the centre of the photographs. Therefore, the thin line between objectification of the female body and its aestheticization is crossed and Upin's photographs of Gangor completely objectify her body as well as her sexuality. Upin's gaze, as the photographer of these images, commands his depiction of Gangor; this is evidenced by Gangor's name for him — "Camera-Sir". This name combines the source of the capturing gaze, namely Upin, with the instrument of the gaze, namely his camera. The violence perpetrated by Upin on Gangor's body simply by photographing her, is akin to the violence perpetrated by the policemen who eventually rape her, in that Upin essentializes Gangor's femininity by making her breasts representative of her authenticity, her naturalness as a rural woman, and her womanhood. His photographs unleash the

violence of gang-rape on Gangor. Even Caretaker, the manager of the bungalow where Upin stays when he visits the village, directly blames Upin's photographs for the rape: "You ruined her with your pictures Sir, otherwise how would she dare" (1998: 152). Upin's photographs therefore set in motion the physical violation and dismemberment of Gangor's body. Thus, while Upin does not in effect rape Gangor, he dismembers her violently by photographing her.

Despite Gangor's violent rape, both real and metaphoric, in Devi's delineation of the post-rape narrative, we see an angry and vengeful Gangor and a nervous and regretful Upin. The roles of the powerful postcolonial intellectual attempting to capture the essence of the passive rural woman with his objectifying gaze, seem now to be reversed as "Upin and Gangor look at each other" (1998: 155). Upin's gaze is reciprocated and his is no longer the active gaze that fixes the passive woman as "Upin offers himself, lets himself go" (1998: 155). Gangor is also an active agent and she returns the look "as if she says to Upin with her beckoning finger, Get thee behind me!" (1998: 155). The two of them enter a shack and notably it is Upin who has difficulty seeing: "Upin *can't see* what else there is in the room" (1998: 156, emphasis mine). When he realizes that Gangor has now become a prostitute, he haltingly demands she take off her blouse. When Gangor finally takes off her choli or bodice, Upin does not see her body directly. Her nakedness is mediated to him through the silhouette cast by the hurricane lantern. He is unable to look at her body and she is the one to command him to look at her. Instead of being the passive recipient of the look, Gangor now directs Upin's look toward herself. However, this time it is not to arouse an erotic impulse but rather to evoke horror and guilt in Upin. She says, "look, look, look, straw — chaff, rags — look what's there" (1998: 157). What is revealed are not Gangor's fantastic and resplendent breasts but instead:

> No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin — *gang rape* . . . biting and tearing *gang rape* . . . *police* . . . a court *case* . . . again a *gang rape* in the *lockup* . . . now from Jharoa to Seopura . . . Seopura to Jharoa . . . the Contractor catches clients . . . terrorizes a *public* . . . plays the song, the song . . .
>
> Upin stands up weaving, unsteady . . .
>
> Upin runs along the tracks. (Devi, 1998: 157; emphases and ellipses in original)

Upin's reaction — his loss for words and his unsteadiness — constitute a crucial moment in the story. It is the moment signifying the transmissibility of trauma or what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathetic unsettlement" (2013: 41). The figure of the bare-chested, breast-less Gangor stands in sharp contrast to Upin's eroticized portrait of her. Gangor's fierce accusations of sexual exploitation — "But I knew your plans. Otherwise would you have given so much cash?" and "You are a bastard too sir . . . you took *photoks* [photos] of my chest, eh?" (1998: 156) — hit home and Upin runs along the railway tracks, presumably to his death. Devi could not have been harsher in her critique of the postcolonial artist who distances his art from the people and himself from any form of social activism.

As Upin runs crazed and confused along the railway tracks, the reversal between the traumatized subject and the unwitting agent of the traumatic act, which Devi has sustained through the story, is now complete. Upin is not only stripped of his photographic and

objectifying gaze but is harshly indicted in the violence that has been enacted upon Gangor's body. Much like Dopdi Mejhen's breasts in "Draupadi", Gangor's breasts — or their absence — are transformed from erotic objects into a counter-offensive. Like Dopdi, Gangor is also portrayed in this scene as a fierce and vengeful woman. Her voice is "ragged with anger" (Devi, 1998: 156) and her body emits the "smell of violent resentment" (1998: 157). Upin, on the other hand, is racked by guilt. He feels responsible not only for Gangor's rape but for the collective rape of the people — "Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known" (1998: 157). The last reference to him in the story is an implied one, of "a months-old picture of a dead man" (1998: 157) given to his friend Ujan. This is a final photographic reversal between Gangor and Upin, between resilient pride and debilitating guilt, between the angrily articulate and the eternally silenced.

The function of the breasts as national allegory becomes clearly articulated in the last lines of the story — "There is no *non-issue* behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it" (1998: 157; emphasis in original) — and in the figure of the traumatized Upin running to his death along the railway tracks. In the above line Devi radically subverts Upin's essentialism of Gangor's female body by making the breast symptomatic not of Gangor's womanhood, rural authenticity, and subaltern status, but rather by making the violent image of the absence of her breasts symptomatic of the rape of *all* subaltern and dispossessed populations. The figure of the violently raped and disfigured, yet resilient subaltern woman in the concluding pages of Devi's story becomes a severe indictment of violence and exploitation of the dispossessed in the postcolonial democratic nation. In contrast, the figure of the crazed photojournalist who has taken on the trauma of the people, after unwittingly causing it, is representative of the ineffectual postcolonial elite (emphasis is added).

Conclusion

Postcolonial trauma theory has revealed the many shortcomings of Western trauma theory — its event-based Eurocentric bias, its foregrounding of what Visser calls "an atemporal human (universal) trauma as expressed in her [Caruth's] oft-quoted phrase that history is the history of a trauma" (2011: 275), and its emphasis on the impossibility of narrating trauma. Reading Devi's story through a trauma theory lens allows us to question these assumptions. Western psychoanalytic discourses of trauma often emphasize the unspeakability and aporia of the traumatic event. Dori Laub describes a traumatized state as:

> the persistence of an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness", a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. [...] The survivor indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (qtd. in Felman and Laub, 1992: 68–69)

Such psychoanalytic analysis, questioned by Visser as to its applicability to postcolonial trauma, is rendered meaningless in analysing the trauma depicted in Devi's stories. Here

we have a sharply contrasting delineation of the traumatized woman. Draupadi, a female revolutionary famed for her courage and ability to repeatedly elude arrest by the authorities, is in no way diminished in her heroism when she faces her rapist at the end of the story. By describing her as an "unarmed target" (1998: 37), Devi alludes to her indomitable spirit and strength. Similarly Gangor vengefully commands Upin to look at her ravaged body, her breastless torso. These women's subjectivities are not shattered and neither have they retreated to a space of passive, aporetic silence incapable of human communication. Instead Draupadi and Gangor fiercely articulate their narratives of brutalization and demand justice. Devi's stories narrate a post-rape afterlife for her female protagonists that is not envisioned as death, reclusive silence, or disappearance. Her stories contribute to a feminist literary history that, in the words of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, "forces us to confront the realities of the subaltern, particularly the female subaltern, in decolonized India" (1993: 70). While for Western trauma theorists like Caruth the trauma of the Holocaust acquires primacy and becomes the lens through which all other traumas are filtered, Devi's stories underscore the urgency of an alternative mode of analysing historical trauma that accounts for the particularities of the traumas of decolonization faced by marginalized populations. Her use of the concept metaphor of rape in the stories discussed provides a powerful critique of decolonization. These stories are not about the awakening of a feminine consciousness in the gendered subaltern. Rather, they are about the inherent strength and power of spirit in the female subaltern that surfaces and vengefully asserts itself at the moment of traumatic degradation and exploitation.

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Notes

1. Deepika Bahri's fitting response to Laub, articulated from the perspective of Partition's "fallen women", is "[O]ne has to bury one's own truth in order to live one's life" (Bahri, 1999: 220).
2. In the story Devi refers to her as both "Draupadi" and "Dopdi". However, in order to distinguish between the protagonist and the mythic heroine, I will refer to the protagonist of Devi's story as "Dopdi" (unless I am quoting Devi) and the epic heroine of the *Mahabharata* as "Draupadi".
3. The Naxalite Rebellion was a Maoist insurgency against the government led by radical communists called Naxals who get their name from the village Naxalbari in West Bengal where

the movement began in 1967. The source of the conflicts was the failure by the government of India to implement the 5th and 6th Schedules of the Indian Constitution which allow for a limited form of tribal autonomy over the natural resources of their land. These schedules limit the possession of the land by landlords and provide for the distribution of land to labourers and dispossessed farmers.

4. This is the spelling in the text. Spivak explains in her translator's foreword that Dopdi is the only character who uses the word "kounter". She writes that the word was explained to her by Devi as "an abbreviation for 'killed by police in an encounter,' the code description for death by police torture" (1998: 15). Spivak goes on to point out the irony of Dopdi, a woman who does not understand English, speaking this word because she understand this formula and the word.
5. I am by no means using this phrase to suggest that male violence perpetrated on a female body is not a bad thing after all, for it triggers female power. Rather, I am merely suggesting that the shift in the protagonist's name (from Dopdi to Draupadi) is indicative of her attaining mythic proportions *after* the rape, not *because* of it.
6. Also see Spivak's "Foreword" for a convincing reading of Senanayak as "the closest approximation to the First-World scholar in search of the Third World" (in Devi, 1995: 1). I have not included this discussion since it is beyond the scope of this article.
7. An article published in 2007 on the rise of rapes by police and security forces in India, cites cases of women being "stripped and paraded naked around the police station" in Jharkhand. See: http://sanhati.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/hrcm-rapes-by-police-and-security-forces-rise.pdf. Also see Deepti Misri's "'Are you a Man?" Performing Naked Protest in India" wherein she discusses the common practice of parading Dalit women naked as a form of humiliation (2014: 117). On a related note, Misri considers Indian women's deployment of "nakedness as a tool of embodied resistance against the patriarchal violence of the state" (114).
8. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nd5NLbUu44
9. For a detailed discussion of the censorship history of the song, see Monika Mehta's "What is Behind Film Censorship" (2001).

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