



Narratives of Resistance: Mahasweta Devi's “Draupadi”

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Abstract

This essay explores women's participation in revolutionary practice, as mapped out in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi". Does Devi romanticise the female revolutionary or centralise the limitations of counter-state activity? This question leads to the way that nationalism, as embodied by the state (through the character of Senanayak), is foregrounded in the text. The restrictions placed upon women by the nation-state are juxtaposed against the issue of female subjectivity, and dominant myths of femininity become a vehicle for mediating notions of female behaviour. I will argue that during nationalist crises, in particular, when the nation is most vulnerable, nationalist signifiers are rigorously applied. Nationalist crises empower Devi's protagonist, whose suffering enables her to go beyond the boundaries of myth, so that in the short story "Draupadi" the mythical figure is reconstructed (as Dopdi) to produce a counter-narrative by deploying the female body and sexuality as the locus of resistance. In selecting the Draupadi myth as a model for the subaltern woman, Devi calls attention to the politics of myth, of how some myths are privileged (like the Sita myth) while the ambiguities within others (like the Draupadi myth) marginalise women. Devi's protagonist is situated at the point of breakdown between myth and its "real-life" context and finds that it is through extreme, "terrifying" measures that one can secure agency, even if it is only in fictional narratives.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, myth, female revolutionary, nationalism, agency

The Naxalite movement between the late sixties and early seventies, with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document. [...] A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him [sic] (Devi, quoted in Bandyopadhyay viii).

Mahasweta Devi's commitment to politics implies that the bounds of the aesthetic must be transgressed to allow for addressing political concerns. As she argues, cultural practices and initiatives must not be restricted by what is conventionally perceived as "art", but must complicate and challenge its terrain and limits. Therefore, Devi's work is rooted in human suffering and the effects of *realpolitik*. Her female protagonists also become conduits for interrogating the repertoire of choices available to women. The "choice" exercised by this subject can, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan suggests, "only be the heavily compromised consensual pact between the individual and the social structures in which she is enmeshed [...] in the case of the *subaltern* subject the access to choice is itself an exceptional event" (162, my emphasis). The female figures have little or no recourse to political action and are entrapped in the complexities of the Naxalite movement and its mutually inclusive relationships of class and nationalism, class and patriarchy, and patriarchy and nationalism.¹

According to Dhillon, "The tragedy of the exploitation of the landless peasants in India, and particularly West Bengal is an ageless one. So is the history of revolt, from the sanyasis and the indigo cultivators to the Naxalbari explosion" (74). In May 1967, a successful peasant uprising in Naxalbari (north Bengal) was led by armed revolutionaries who belonged to the Communist Party of India. From 1967–1972 they fought against the feudal elite. Although its effective strength was confined to a few pockets in the country, the ideology of Naxalism permeated the Indian consciousness. The intervention of a downtrodden

people – handling rifles and challenging their oppressors – “might seem insignificant to the urban middle class, [but it] was immensely significant to the rural poor”; giving rise to the simplistic view that the Naxalite movement was the happy marriage between the peasant/subaltern and the middle-class intellectuals (Banerjee v). This historic moment is now generally appropriated as a middle-class rather than a peasant tragedy and retrospective analyses of the Naxalite movement accentuate the involvement of the intellectuals (particularly young university students), tending to overlook the input of the peasantry. Surprisingly, unlike the other peasant movement that was spearheaded by a middle class leadership from Calcutta, the movement sparked off in the Naxalbari area was led by an unexpected coalition of peasants and intellectuals. The target of these movements was the long established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm workers, sustained through an unofficial government landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law.² Migrants like Dopdi and her husband Dulna were forced to work for below the government’s fixed minimum wage and were fighting for survival. To counteract dissent Indira Gandhi’s administration asserted the need to strengthen “national identity”. The justifications for crushing the Naxalite rebellion played on Indian middle-class fears that the centre might not hold (47).

Devi’s short story “Draupadi” (1988) underlines the distinctions of class that enabled the central government to garner widespread support from the elites and middle classes by highlighting Dopdi’s underclass status and pitting this position of vulnerability to enable the middle class “gentleman” Senanayak to victimize her. In tracing the prominent aspects of the Naxalite struggle, the oppositional class relationship between revolutionary and captor is foregrounded. The politics of the Naxalite movement challenge the hegemonic concept of the Nation promulgated since India’s Independence and the management of the Naxalite uprising by the state (or its agents) and anticipate some of the authoritarian forms of governance witnessed later during the Emergency. The central government mobilised the military and armed forces to suppress the movement and political unrest followed, spreading all over the country. “The grotesque suppression of ‘The People’s movement’ (as the Naxalbari Movement was termed then)” included rape (Latha 4). Sen (2011) also acknowledges that it was the Naxalites who, in the late 1960s, drew national attention to the sexual exploitation of peasant women in Bengal at the hands of their landlords.

The story pivots around the multiple rape of the protagonist Dopdi/Draupadi, revealing how political events impinge upon “female” experience and influence the negotiation of female subjectivity. In Gayatri Spivak’s words, “Mahasweta dramatises the difficult truth: internalised gendering” (xxxviii). Spivak’s concern with the conditions of (im)possibility of subaltern speech, emphasises the power of the colonising European subject to render the subaltern mute. Devi’s configuration underscores the mainstream postcolonial Indian subject – middle and upper class, Aryan, urbanized – operating in a neo-colonial setting that silences the *Adivasi* or tribal peoples (Williams 13).

The text is translated from Bengali into English. I have chosen Spivak’s translation of “Draupadi” because she also alerts the reader to the problematic aspects of translation.³ In the foreword Spivak signals the points of crisis and the assumptions underpinning characterisation and linguistic idiosyncrasies within the text, which I will discuss in greater length later (186-187).

“Draupadi” and the Reinvention of Myth

In “Draupadi” three main areas of negotiation raise questions pertaining to gender and nation. I intend to explore whether women’s participation in revolutionary practice, as mapped out in the short story is positive

or restrictive for the mobilisation of women's agency. Does Devi romanticise the female revolutionary or centralise the limitations of counter-state activity? This question leads to the way that nationalism, as embodied by the state, through the protagonist Senanayak, is foregrounded in the text. The restrictions placed upon women by the nation-state are juxtaposed against the issue of female subjectivity, and dominant myths of femininity become a vehicle for mediating notions of female behaviour. A homogeneous "national" image promoted by the state is codified along a continuum of "appropriate" gender roles. Hegemonies of class, caste, and gender interlock in determining the standards of non-nationalist, "anomalous" female behaviour, and these standards hold true even in the arena of conflict. During nationalist crises, in particular, when the nation is most vulnerable, nationalist signifiers are rigorously applied. Nationalist crises empower Devi's protagonist, and her suffering enables her to go beyond the boundaries of myth, so that in the short story the mythical figure is reconstructed to produce a counter-narrative by deploying the female body and sexuality as the locus of resistance.⁴ Bloom points out that "many people have assumed that women could not consciously choose to participate in terrorism of their own volition. The underlying assumption is that a man made her do it. In their attempts to explain women's involvement in terrorism for a general audience, journalistic accounts have presented a far too simple and uni-dimensional account of the phenomenon" (ix).

Draupadi is one of the most celebrated heroines from the Indian epics. The title of Devi's short story recalls the episode in the *Mahabharatha* where Arjuna, the third of the five Pandava brothers, wins the woman Draupadi as his prize by performing an extraordinary feat of marksmanship. When they arrive home after the contest, Kunti, their mother, is inside the house and does not see Draupadi. Arjuna tells her that he has brought home a "gift" and she replies that this "gift" must be shared equally among the five of them. Although the concept of sharing one wife between five men is considered preposterous, they cannot disobey their mother, and Draupadi is forced into a polyandrous marriage. Neither Draupadi nor the brothers are comfortable with this arrangement. Yudhistira, the eldest of the brothers, suggests "a woman married to one man is a wife, two, three, four or five, a public woman. She is sinful. Whoever heard of such a thing?" (Narayan 147).

The pivotal moment in the epic is when Yudhistira loses his possessions (including Draupadi) to his cousin and rival, Duryodhana, in a game of dice. In front of an assembly of men, Duryodhana violently attempts to disrobe Draupadi, at which point she appeals to the god Krishna. Each time her sari is pulled by Duryodhana, it gets longer, thereby preventing her from being disrobed. Traditionally this moment is regarded as the manifestation of divine intervention. Krishna rewards Draupadi's modest demeanour by performing a miracle and hence protecting her honour. In her approach to these episodes Spivak argues that "Draupadi's legitimised pluralisation (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" (183). Restoring the uncorrupted, mythological form of her name is part of an intertextual strategy (Pesso-Miquel 154). In Devi's story, initially introduced as Dopdi, the referent Draupadi is also used to identify the subversive tribal woman. The process of naming foregrounds the politics of class. There are three versions of her name, Draupadi, the "formal" name conferred upon her by her employer, a rich landowner's wife; Dopdi, the "informal", tribal version, and Upi Mejhen, a name she adopts to disguise herself after the death of her husband. These names work as a trope for two discourses that run concurrently through the text, one marked by the formal, official language of military, and state, historiography, and the other belonging to the informal, everyday discourse of the tribal characters. A close reading of the narrative structures reveals the ideological positioning of these discursive formations. The names play a definitive role in the transformation of Dopdi/Draupadi's subjectivity.

The tribal name fixes her underclass position and is a constant reminder of Draupadi's bondage. In the first part of the story, the service mentality underlies Dopdi's every action. Even when she is no longer in the service of a household and is an outlaw, she is limited by gender and class hierarchies – by devotion to her husband and then to the elite leadership of the movement.⁵ Significantly, her devotion to her husband is the point at which the association with the Draupadi myth is reinforced.

On the one hand, the tribal name shifts the focus from the myth and foregrounds the specificities of class and ethnic or regional make-up.⁶ The reader is made aware that being named after the heroine Draupadi is merely a magnanimous gesture on the part of her higher-class mistress. On the other hand, the name establishes a correspondence between the tribal woman and the epic figure whilst it also testifies to the ubiquity of myth in the Indian consciousness and its transmutations in the contemporary Indian political context.⁷ The construction of the protagonist as Dopdi/Draupadi is not a total rejection of the epic but veers away from exact replication of the myth. Restoring the uncorrupted, mythological form of her name is part of an intertextual strategy: while reinscribing the ascendancy of the famous polyandrous heroine of the *Mahabharata*, it also gestures that Devi's modern Draupadi, raped and bleeding between her legs, resembles her namesake only in name.

Some facets of the narrative converge with the epic. In a radical departure from traditional representations of epic heroines such as Sita, several versions of the epic emphasise Draupadi's "dark" complexion. Notions of "ideal" beauty in South Asia are contingent upon complexion, height, and youthful appearance. A contemporary instance of this phenomenon occurs in the film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) where Jinder, an Asian woman who leaves her wife-beating husband, is denounced by her mother-in-law as "evil" and responsible for the breakdown of her marriage and bringing shame upon the family because she is dark-skinned: "I knew she was no good. Dark girls are shameless".

The focus on Draupadi's "darkness" is evidence of the effects of ideological constructions in the collective consciousness.⁸ This may explain why Draupadi is not considered the model of the "ideal" woman, unlike her counterpart Sita. Repeated references to the "blackness" of Dopdi and her husband constitute a subversive moment, picked up from the epic and signalling class/caste distinctions that get historically reinstated into hegemonic hierarchies (Devi 188, 193, 196). It also speaks of the politics of representation. Myths, like other discourses, are functional and popular only when they fulfil the requirements of the dominant group. "Myth as an essential source and vehicle of hegemonic control serves to contain and condition the responses of the marginalized 'other', portrayed in Mahasweta's history of the subaltern which comes forth in the form of a dialogue against the oppressively hegemonic Itihas Puranic history of India" (Sharma 5).

Up to a point, the patriarchal underpinnings within the Draupadi myth are in place in Devi's version. Like her epic counterpart, Dopdi is devoted to her husband and continues the struggle out of loyalty to him and her promise, "By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told" (Devi 193).⁹ Her indebtedness to her forefathers is attached to a sense of pride in her "blood" and the knowledge that they protected their women. Interestingly, in this passage Dopdi's "blood" refers to her ethnic purity – her pure unadulterated "black" blood – in contrast to Shomai and Bhudna, the traitors in the story, "half-breeds" whose blood is diluted by American soldiers (Devi 193). Her thought "Protected their blood" implies, controlled their sexuality, one of the Nation's main anxieties. Here it is ironic because the tribal woman reproduces the dominant ideology of racial purity, even though it is her tribal purity that overrides all other markers of identity. The counter-state revolutionary's eagerness to maintain this "dignity" reveals how this ideology is deeply entrenched in the mind of the nation's citizens. Devi goes on to uncover the futility of this ideology in the final section of her

story. At this point, the revolutionary woman is regulated by norms of female behaviour, defined by constructions of “ideal” epic heroines who channel their moral force and physical vitality into devotion to the husband (Mitter 98). It is a homogenous code of behaviour leading to the erasure of class, ethnic, and regional specificities.

Whereas in the myth, Draupadi’s acceptance of her polyandrous marriage is rewarded by Krishna’s miracle, in Devi’s more realistic representation of female subjugation, the absence of the “divine” element is stark. As Spivak has rightly pointed out, Devi does not romanticise Dopdi/Draupadi’s tribal status, nor does she ignore the gender and class inequalities that circumscribe the tribal woman’s position in the revolutionary movement (184). Despite the limited political efficacy of revolutionary politics, the Naxalite movement offers Dopdi a degree of active participation, even as a messenger. In order to gain a more precise purchase of Devi’s perceptions of the politics of the struggle within the patriarchal framework of the Indian nation-state, it is useful to compare the complexities of Dopdi/Draupadi’s commitment to the Naxalite movement.

When women engage in battle, alongside their male “colleagues”, it is regarded as gender equality within the movement, while ignoring the mobilisation of women in armed conflict as a political strategy that *co-opts* them in the service of the patriarchal revolutionary movement rather than emancipating them. For instance, when an overwhelming number of men are killed in battle, sometimes women are recruited to make up numbers and serve as cannon fodder.¹⁰

In “Draupadi” there is no attempt to erase the fact that women are often used as adjuncts to the male fighters, not as active participants in their own right.¹¹ Dopdi’s commitment to the movement is dictated by a strongly male-dominated power base. She does not operate autonomously until her husband’s death. To signpost the participation of women in the Naxalite movement as a recognition of their rights and a stride in “liberatory politics” is to ignore the male-centred underpinnings of the revolutionary ideology. By referring repeatedly to male voices, leadership and commands in Devi’s story, the narrator deconstructs the revolutionary rhetoric by foregrounding its phallogentricity. The ironic comment – “Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women’s blood in black armor [sic]” (Devi 193) – alerts us to the appropriation of patriarchal notions in putative progressive struggles. The protagonist’s identity and dignity are bound to a notion of *male* warrior strength. Likewise, the instructions that Dopdi carries with her, the “voices” in her head, are male-controlled. In her introduction to the story, Spivak accentuates the fact that Dopdi “[...] keeps her political faith as an act of faith towards [her husband]” and goes on to argue that the decision-makers among the revolutionaries are always “bourgeois young men and women” (184).

Both the epic and the short story intersect in their patriarchal undertones. However, whereas in the epic, patriarchal hegemony remains intact, the ending of Devi’s “Draupadi” subverts dominant gender relations, proceeding to offer a mode of resistance. The final moments, with Dopdi/Draupadi’s retaliation for her multiple rape, overturn the patriarchal politics that, together with nationalism, constrain female subjectivity. Devi’s investment of Dopdi/Draupadi to epic proportions not only serves to undermine the dominant myth of divine protection, but reveals “myth’s potential to come into being, alter, disintegrate, or disappear completely” (Barthes 120). Myth may have a transformative potential — as a vehicle for insurgency, granting Dopdi with a status that is, albeit for a fleeting moment, frightening for her male captors.

The Moment of Capture: Reading Gender/Nation

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, She's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. [...] Draupadi stands before him [Senanayak], naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. [...] The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to *see how they made me?* (Devi 196, my emphasis)

The above excerpt leads to the final moments of the story, which provoke questions about female insurgency and resistance to patriarchal and military suppression. These moments, designed to constitute subversion and transgression, destabilising the parameters of patriarchal and military dictatorships, enable a myriad of readings. Does this underscore the limiting effect of solitary revolt? Is Dopdi's success a mere narrative sleight of hand, a one-off refusal to cave under torture imposed by the author upon her character, rather than something replicable or capable of collective application?

After she is captured, Dopdi/Draupadi is completely alone, abandoned by the other members of the movement. There is no "male" supernatural force to restore her dignity or female "respectability", and the "male glory" that compels Dopdi to continue fighting fails her. The narrative does not "protect" her by adopting an optimistic or hopeful note (which is often the case in traditional versions of the epic).¹² The sole point of textual reference to Krishna in Devi's narrative appears as parody. Prior to her capture, the guards listen to Sanjeev Kumar, a popular Indian film actor, and his comical rendition of Lord Krishna. These moments are an exposition of the overdetermined effect of religion, an instrument for enforcing patriarchal identity and dominance. It is the men, particularly the agents of the state, who listen to the voice of Krishna, and religion has no meaning except in comedy. This is analogous to the way in which the Hindu concept of *shakthi*, the female principle, was politically manipulated to mobilise women in the anti-colonial struggle, invoking the notion that they are capable of displaying exceptional heroism. This ideological stance is problematic as it vindicates participatory methods in conflict such as the enforced carrying of heavy provisions by women, their co-optation in service roles designed to ensure the well-being of the male leaders or, their utilisation as decoys/masquerades.

The description of the relentless torture that is inflicted upon Draupadi relies on two kinds of imagery. Devi encodes the ceaseless rapes, followed by the mutilation of her breasts, through animal metaphors and metaphors of military/technology, which not only divest Dopdi of humanity, but underscore the animalistic ethos that pervades the domain of war. This strategy inverts the dominant power relations in the story. When Dopdi acts like an animal, by tearing her cloth with her teeth, it invokes terror among the guards and they are unable to deal with her behaviour. It forces them to face what they have *made* of her. Ironically, animalistic brutality, when perpetrated by men, is often legitimised and vindicated, but *her* animalistic behaviour becomes "irrational" because it disrupts conventional feminine traits of victimhood.

"Active *pistons* of flesh rise and fall" (Devi 195). "Pistons" resonates with the mechanical, clinical language of the military and recalls the references to guns and weaponry. Pistons, a euphemism for the penis, are a weapon of domination, instrumental in Dopdi's destruction. Male dominance and military power, as well as the masculinist character of the state, are reconstituted in the narrative through the emphatically military register. A deliberate choice of linguistic devices stresses the close relationship between patriarchal and state/military/nationalist jargon. The effect of such language is a divestment of emotion, a sanitisation, so that human beings can be treated in a clinical manner very much like military

targets. The militarisation of language is not confined to the realms of war but infiltrates social spheres, becoming, for instance, a way of objectifying processes like sterilisation or the systematic elimination of suspected dissenters, both of which are defining characteristics of the Indian Emergency. Much of the narrative's impact lies in the effective coexistence of the language of the military/state and the informal, everyday conversations of the tribal people. Military discourse is signposted by the short, staccato sentences and the ubiquitous, international "language of war – offence and defence" (Spivak 185).

Significantly, the ideological entrenchment of military terminology is so pervasive that both Dopdi and her captors utilise the jargon to encode acts of immense human suffering. The most prominent example of the currency of the language of war is inscribed in the word "counter". "Counter," is another euphemism, standing for "killed by police in an encounter" (Devi 192). Dopdi is haunted by this word and its implications, it is embedded in her psyche, and directs her every thought and action. Finally, when she is made to confront Senanayak, she includes this word in her challenge to him and it has an incantatory effect. *Her* utterance of it, as a subaltern woman, takes on a sinister note as she accentuates the violence of political and military discourse. It intensely emphasises the way in which language masks very real, traumatic human abuse. Deaths and disappearances within the state are obliterated and effaced from official narratives through the enforcement of such terms.

"Counter me" in this context also has the effect of parody. On the one hand it sounds ridiculous since the revolutionary woman is ravaged to such an extent, and divested of any modicum of human dignity that, whatever else she has to face, even death, ceases to have a meaning for her (Devi 196). On the other hand, "counter" is also a contradiction, for it does *not* fulfil its objective. Rather than destroying the subaltern woman it empowers her, not only to challenge Senanayak, but through her questions, "Are you a man?" and "There isn't a man that I should be ashamed", she throws into crisis the masculinity of bourgeois nationalism.

Likewise, "[...] see how they made me" has more than one meaning. The command "make her" is like the term "counter", a way of making her talk, an irony in the light of Spivak's famous question "can the subaltern speak?". But Dopdi does "speak," not in a conventional way, but by tearing her cloth. This form of speaking is not heard because, as far as the guards are concerned, her behaviour is incomprehensible. Interestingly, Senanayak, who prides himself on being able to "anticipate their [the revolutionaries'] every move," cannot find a meaning to Dopdi's actions (Devi 194). The intentions of his command, "make her", have therefore failed.

"Make" is the most forceful irony in the text. On the one hand, semantically, it has the opposite effect. Instead of destroying the revolutionary, it re-creates her. Rape and torture are the primary ways of "making" a revolution and both are weapons of power and control. It is recognised that female rape reaffirms male supremacy. Its roots can be traced to an age-old practice, where the violation of the enemy's women consolidates territorial and military acquisition. Male identity is bound up with the assumption that rape guarantees that a woman is "his". As a specifically "sexual form of violence" which takes as its objective an appropriation of woman as "the sex", rape objectifies woman as a "sexualised, *eroticised* and ravaged body", and when rape is utilised as an expression of patriarchy it also invests in political power (Sharpe 229). The objectification process of woman is sometimes intricately bound to notions of masculinity. Thus even though Senanayak does not directly participate in the rape, his response to the knowledge that the tribal woman has been crushed, vicariously fulfils his masculine power. The discourse of war closely resembles the language of nationalism, which derives its kudos from a masculinised enterprise, where the security of the nation is dependent on elite patriarchal structures. While the feminised image of the

nation, “raped”, “dishonoured,” and waiting to be avenged by the courageous soldiers/sons, has percolated into the realms of public consciousness, in Devi’s narrative, it is “the state, through its intermediaries – the armed forces, Police, intelligence service – which becomes the rapist, raping its own citizens, those it is sworn to protect” (Ahmed 19-20).

In spite of her relentless rape and torture, Dopdi is “made” in the sense that, albeit appallingly, it releases her, makes her powerful, heroic, even legendary. Dopdi’s “making/unmaking” ultimately provokes Senanayak’s unmaking. Therefore, the confrontation between Dopdi/Draupadi and her captor disrupts the dominant image of nationalism played out through its principal representative – the state, because the woman seizes agency and, at the moment of violation, it enfeebles and emasculates the language of nationalism. The mandatory silencing of the subaltern subject fails. Unlike the boy who bit off his tongue when he was countered, from the moment she is captured Dopdi flouts even the instructions of her leader, and “ululates with the force of her entire being” (Devi 195). The most striking and tragic aspect of the story is the threatening image of a denuded, ravaged female body who then becomes a hunted, heroic revolutionary.

The shifts in name, from Draupadi to Dopdi acquire symbolic value during the course of this “making”. In her use of “making” and “unmaking”, Devi locates woman as the subject of the verb, that is, as agent, and the words denote ideological and physical processes where the boundaries between destruction and liberation fluctuate. Dopdi/Draupadi’s subjectivity is determined by the shifts between tribal and formal names. In the final section of the story, the referent Draupadi directly associates the revolutionary woman with her epic counterpart as she is transformed into a figure of epic proportions. When she says, “The object of your search Dopdi Mejhen”, laughing through bloodied lips and standing sneeringly with her hand on her hip, it is as if “Dopdi Mejhen”, the appellation for the fugitive revolutionary in the military dossier on Dopdi/Draupadi, is being ridiculed (Devi 196). As she speaks she reclaims her subjectivity: naming herself thus is a way of “remaking” herself outside of the phallogocentric language of nationalist/military enterprise.

“Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts” is surely the most disturbingly assertive action in the story, and for it, Devi gives her the epic heroine’s name (Devi 196). Before going on to discuss Devi’s stand on myth, it is worth mentioning how Devi uses this moment to illustrate the underlying dynamics of revolutionary practice for the female revolutionary.

The practicalities of Dopdi’s life as a revolutionary entail adopting tools and procedures which are perceived as “macho,” for instance, the half-moon knife and tobacco in her belt, the code words she uses, and by her continuing to work within the movement after her husband’s death. Yet, she is also different to and excluded from the activities of the male revolutionaries. Indeed, her male colleagues ultimately betray her, and she is placed with the burden of “acknowled[ging] defeat and start[ing] the activities of the next stage,” which holds an implicit criticism of the patriarchal determinants of Naxalism (Devi 195). However, she refuses to accept defeat.

It is at this moment that Devi invokes the myth, while simultaneously transforming it. While the mythic heroine appeals to Lord Krishna for a miracle and waits in anticipation for his intervention to safeguard her naked body, the tribal woman cannot rely on any male, whether it is a male god, her husband, or any of the men within the revolutionary movement. By disallowing her rape and nakedness to suppress her, but deploying the rape as a weapon, Devi inverts the whole system of significations that the epic is based upon. This particular episode of Mahabharata assigns sexual assault and nakedness, i.e., shame, loss, and fear to consolidate the manipulations of power. Mahasweta’s Dopdi “ironically reverses the semiotics of

these signs to incarnate a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare amongst the male-dominated societal hierarchies” (Sharma 6).

At this moment in the narrative since Dopdi has lost everything, her last gesture of defiance becomes a moment of triumph. If there is a correspondence in the defencelessness of the epic figure and the revolutionary, it is only momentary. Her body, the repository for male actions, becomes active and terrifying and the wounds of war become aggressive when she pushes Senanayak with her breasts, demonstrating how the biological life of human beings becomes subject to political decisions and objectification (Jayatilleke 1). In the aftermath of rape, raising her voice against her oppressors destroys the connivance of silence surrounding rape and foregrounds how guilt should reside in the perpetrator, and not the victim (Katharpi 69).

Albeit the ravaged female body is exhibited to serve political decisions, Devi enables the transformative potential of her wounds, conveyed through the ironic employment of the cosmetic metaphor “make-up”. In her repetition of “you asked them to make me up”, the revolutionary woman is “made”, in the sense of “assured of success” through her sufferings, and can confront the hegemony of the male gaze with the naked display of her ravaged female body (Devi 196). This body gestures towards a feminist emancipatory politics which exceeds the patriarchal determinations of the Naxalite movement and nation-state ideology. We can also understand through the power of this moment why religio-cultural discourses in India enforce the notion that female sexuality/energy *shakthi* is feared and has to be trammelled.

The concept of masculinity, so crucial to upholding the nationalist agenda, is destabilised in the final scene, and the male gaze is unable to confront its usual object, the female body. Enshrined with traditional values and culture, the clothed female body is inverted and provides a site of insurgency. The final moments of the story also draw attention to the conceptualisation of female sexuality. Received notions of female sexuality and behaviour are coupled and aligned with bourgeois morality and hegemonic nationalism. These concerns relate to the question of agency and female subjectivity.

To elaborate: conventionally, the physical manifestation of female identity and subjectivity reside in the breasts. Dopdi’s nakedness represents the subaltern resistance against the very institutions – the state, family, religion – that define notions of “respectability” and class-marked codes of female behaviour. This is overlaid with the construction of middle-class norms of respectability and modesty; the respectable woman is a figure cut to the measure of middle-class society and incorporated into the image of the nation.¹³ Dopdi’s violent flaunting of her nakedness allows us to see the redundancy of middle-class norms of respectability and modesty because, in the face of conflict, these conventional notions become meaningless. Even a semblance of “normality” cannot be applied to understand Dopdi’s trauma.

In selecting the Draupadi myth as a model for the subaltern woman, Devi calls attention to the politics of myth, of how some myths are privileged (like the Sita myth) while the ambiguities within others (like the Draupadi myth) marginalise them. The Draupadi myth inhabits a less popular position among the myths.¹⁴ Her polyandrous marriage may account for the element of uneasiness attached to the story. Even if Draupadi’s relationship with five men is rationalised and vindicated in the epic, the anomalous sexual relations of such a marriage preclude her from being valorised as an “ideal” wife. Yet, no space is created to enunciate her perspective towards this arrangement: that she may derive satisfaction in having sexual relations with five brothers or may be totally repulsed by the idea. Either way, she is denied any choice in the matter. This lack of choice can be likened to the suffering of the underclass woman. For her, multiple rape, acute economic exploitation, and the mutilation of her body form a composite of her lived experiences.

Devi's protagonist is situated at the point of break down between myth and its "real-life" context and finds that it is through extreme, "terrifying" measures that one can secure agency.

Getting back to how to read this act of resistance.

Dopdi fails to enjoy divine status and escalation of prestige as epic Draupadi earned, but somehow, she has registered her presence by her utmost suffering and sacrifice that will remain, echoing in the annals of tribals and the crime charts of authorities, and traditionally dominant male societies, as a reminder of their cruelty and the befitting reaction of the Woman. (Chowdhury 277)

Interpreting Dopdi's final act as resistance, an opportunity to seize agency, is echoed by Pesso-Miquel (2007), Sinha (2016), and Sharma (2017). Dhillon argues that it "proves to be the true face of feminist assertion in India" (76). It is perhaps simplistic to over-emphasise the impact or implications of such acts of resistance (even if they did occur) within the realms of "lived reality". Admittedly, Devi's authorial license affords her the luxury of delving into the impossible. Her fictionalized treatment of the abject body is an acute reminder that, despite the real and serious violence that must be actively resisted, agency can be exercised from some marginal positions, and "representing that body allows her to bear witness to the history of violence against a marginalized group while simultaneously carving out spaces for the exercise of agency by a refashioned, though still obviously violated, subaltern subject" (Williams 24-25). However, "by breathing life into fictional characters, literature turns the anonymous, global statistics of horror into individualized, personal case studies, mixing the private and the public, and even if very often fiction can only helplessly record oppression" (Pesso-Miquel 150).

Arguably, formulations of resistance as portrayed in "Draupadi" may be impracticable, even far removed from the sphere of "collective application," but "as long as writers like Mahasweta Devi [...] continue to create new and inventive visions of life and to denounce bigotry, narrow-mindedness and hatreds of all sorts in poetic, comic, and ever-renewed language, there is hope that the new inquisitions and new archaisms may still be defeated. This is a comforting thought within the postmodernist intellectual landscape of cynicism and nihilism" (Pesso-Miquel 159).

NOTES

¹ The Naxalite crisis is generally regarded as the forerunner to the general political climate of India during the Emergency. In a personal communication to me, Lakshmi Holström reiterated the significance of the Naxalite uprising in the contemporary historical landscape (Holström in interview with Neluka Silva, 3 July 1997).

² See Silva for fuller details.

³ In their introductions to Devi's work, Bandyopadhyay and Spivak call attention not only to the subtleties and nuances of the Bengali language, but also to Devi's deliberate choice of particular idioms and style to transmit her own political ideology.

⁴ Myths are identified as a component preceding and following the formation of the nation-state (Smith 146-147). The persistent endorsements of its significance for imparting an understanding of political reality has been arrogated by artists as a vehicle for their own cultural initiatives. Antony Smith argues that in the construction of the Indian nation, a host of Hindu myths and symbols were available to be worked into

coherent myths of origin and descent. He notes that “what helped the radical nationalists was the survival of sacred texts like the Gita, the widespread belief in deities like Kali and Shiva and the existence of well-known symbols and rites of an ancient Hindu culture like the cow, the Ganges and the ablutions” (146). Their “quality of timelessness” has secured a privileged space in the post-Independence Indian context (Mukherjee 134). In contemporary Indian writing, both in English and the regional languages, writers grapple with socio-political concerns by inscribing the mythic framework. Furthermore, although derived from the Hindu ethos, myths are among the few “common links that constitute an all-Indian frame of reference, equally valid to the Tamilian and the Punjabi”, whether the objective is to reinforce or disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the nation-state (Mukherjee 134).

⁵ In the notes to her translation, Spivak identifies the name of the revolutionary leader as marked by class, tracing its bourgeois provenance (184).

⁶ These two names recall a practice that is often evident among the lower classes in Sri Lanka, particularly among the (now decreasing) phenomenon of the woman of the house naming her servant’s children. A formal name is given, but a shortened or informal derivative is used in daily interactions.

⁷ Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) also reworks this myth. The attempt at disrobing Draupadi is allegorised into a contest between democracy (Draupadi) and the authoritarianism of Priya Duryodhani (a symbolic manifestation of Indira Gandhi).

⁸ See R.K. Narayan’s retelling of the myth, “her complexion was dark” (150). Other accounts of the myth also centralise this aspect of Draupadi’s physical appearance. See also Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*.

⁹ References to “Draupadi” will hereafter be from Gayatri Spivak’s translation in *In Other Worlds* (187-196).

¹⁰ Within the Sri Lankan militant Tamil organisation, LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), there is a history of using women as suicide bombers, or in the frontlines of battle, or as decoys, before the “elite” soldiers are sent in. In July 1996, approximately 20 LTTE women soldiers were initially sent in to infiltrate one of the largest army camps in Mullativu, in the north of Sri Lanka.

¹¹ That is not to say that “non-violent” forms of resistance – for instance, Gandhi’s vision – is liberatory. See Ketu Katrak (395-406).

¹² For example, see Narayan’s account of this episode in *The Mahabharatha* (1987: 79-80) and *Gods, Demons and Others* (157-159).

¹³ See Tharu and Lalita for a discussion of the classed construction of “respectability” in the Indian context (82-83).

¹⁴ See Katrak who makes the point that whereas the pre-Independence nationalists called for the mobilisation of female “virtues”, Gandhi’s model of female strength was Draupadi (398). Hers is the “more appropriate, feminine courage which, in the face of imminent dishonour, calls upon Lord Krishna for help”.

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