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## Reimagining Draupadi: Resistance In Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi, Encrypting Subaltern Approach

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of female subalterns in ancient Indian texts like the Mahabharata and the Manusmriti and compares them to the depiction of contemporary female subalterns in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Dopdi" from the collection Agni Gharba. While using the framework of subaltern theory, articulated by Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this paper attempts to analyze how women are marginalized, oppressed, and denied agency within patriarchal power structures. It highlights the experiences of both the mythological Draupadi and Devi's Dopdi and their shared vulnerability and exploitation as women. While the mythological Draupadi endures pain and humiliation within the confines of her social status and ultimately relies on male intervention for revenge, Dopdi, a tribal woman and Naxalite rebel, personifies a more thorough form of defiance. Dopdi's resistance in her response to sexual violence challenges scruples and exposes the vicious realities of the androcentric approach in modern India. This research addresses the forms of female subalternity that may have evolved, but the core issues of marginalization and suffering persist. The comparison between the two characters underscores the enduring struggle for justice and agency women in India face, even as they strive for empowerment and recognition.

**KEYWORDS:** Dopdi, Draupadi, gender, Mahabharata, patriarchy, subaltern

## INTRODUCTION

Female mythological characters like Sita from Ramayana or Draupadi from Mahabharata have often inspired many scholars. However, the female mythological characters and their retellings are not limited to Sita and Draupadi. Writers such as Kavita Kane's works, Ahalaya's Awakening (2022), Menaka's Choice (2016), and Saraswati's Gift (2021) bring out the female perceptions of choice, freedom, domination, and enduring empowerment that are buried under myths and legends. Devakaruni's Palace of Illusions (2008) is again a mythical tale written to delineate Draupadi's eye of Mahabharata. She makes the readers walk a mile in Draupadi's shoes. Similarly, Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar (2011) retells Sita's story through a graphic format, portraying her as a submissive queen manipulated by patriarchal forces. Such writers have exceptionally flipped and molded these epics to present the views and emotions of such characters that showcase oppression by the male-dominated society, which is still a relevant issue in the 21st century (Bhat, 2021).

Sarukkai (2012) says, "A person who experiences is not an author of that experience like a person who theorizes about that experience" (38). Thus, the women who have experienced marginalization or gender-based discrimination at some point in their lives are experts in living their experience but are not in the position to analyze or theorize it more broadly. One such writer is Mahasweta Devi. Devi's "Draupadi" is a part of the "Breast Trilogy". "Draupadi" first appeared in Agni Garbha (Womb of Fire, 1978). Devi offers a bitter comment on the state violence that is still accurately relevant today.

Unlike mythological Draupadi (in Devi's story), who has the protection of the male against the 'vastraharan', a dishonorable act of disrobing or stripping the woman of her clothes literally and her honor metaphorically, Dopdi, a subaltern, has no such male safeguarding her. She is dishonored by the state patriarchy. This sharp juxtaposition lays the groundwork for the article's exploration of the two characters. The article aims to compare Mahabharata's Draupadi and Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi by intertwining them with subaltern theory. Therefore, this article will argue based on these literary theories and the ancient texts of Manusmriti and Mahabharata in advocating the roles of women. The retelling of Devi's version of Draupadi will be overviewed to see if women are still marginalized or if the conditions have improved for them in their inner and outer circles along with their inner journeys.

Mahasweta Devi is an eminent Bengali writer who focused on the social and political issues faced by lower and backward-class communities. Her work has been widely translated and mainly focuses on the aspects of tribal lives, and their thoughts. Devi outlines the brutal oppression and marginalization experienced by the tribals on a daily basis. Dopdi is one such work, wherein parallels can be drawn with Mahabharata's Draupadi but the two characters are also different in various regards. For instance, Devi's Dopdi resists the male domination of upper castes and government officials and fought herself when disrobed of her honor. In fact, as a sign of retaliation and

protest, she stripped herself of the remaining clothes on her body. However, Mahabharata's Draupadi expressed her resistance by cursing the Kauravas and asking the males present in the court to protect her.

The article doesn't follow a linear pattern but is iterative as it constantly weaves the two characters and juxtaposes them, while also situating them in the contemporary scenario. To understand these intersections, it is necessary to first explore the significance of mythology. What is mythology? And how does each one of us believe in it? Myth inspires or shows ways to live a basic life through its legend and other significant characters. It is constantly reinterpreted with the changing world outlook and expands with the emergence of new interests and perspectives. Myth has influenced the human mind throughout these centuries, but as mentioned above, it expands its meaning with new interests (Barr, 1959, 4). The devotees are enlightened and inspired to live a better life through these mythical stories and legends. Bhagvat Gita, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Manusmriti, and Krishna Leela are epitomes of morals and ethical conduct that a person should adhere to live a life of peace.

This article looks deep into two epics—Mahabharata and Manusmriti—to examine the roles given to women. Mahabharata is the longest epic in the world and represents Indian culture with its distant social, moral, and cultural message. While teaching us about life, it also gives an unusual take on life through a variety of characters in different walks of life. On the other hand, Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate for economics, says that mythologies are merely stories, and it does not hold any historical value (Joshi, 2010; Campbell, 1991).

This argument that it lacks historical value can be supported by the narrative structures and absence of empirical shreds of evidence, but it plays a vital role in shaping our values and culture. The central character, Draupadi, is presented as the epitome of suffering and sacrifice. She sets standards or principles for contemporary women and is a self-motivated character who finds innovation and improvisation in every successive story in which she is a part. Each new legend reveals new aspects of her personality and emotions.

It is in this context that the issue of identity, marginalization, and constant patriarchy becomes significant. Italian philosopher and historian Antonio Gramsci categorizes this as “subaltern” in the context of postcolonial theory. The term refers to marginalized and oppressed groups within society who are excluded from the dominant power structures and often lack a voice in political and cultural discourse. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak further expands on this concept in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she examines the identity crises faced by marginalized groups and the challenges they encounter in achieving self-expression or freedom (Spivak 1988).

Spivak proposes an effort to reclaim the language, symbols, and structures used as tools of colonial hegemony. This aligns with what Homi Bhabha calls an in-between, hybrid position of practice and negotiation, or what Spivak terms catachresis: “reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding” (Prakash, 1994). This concept involves questioning dominant systems of meaning and reclaiming agency for marginalized groups through alternative narratives, including literature.

## Enslavement or Respect? Women's Roles in Manusmriti

The Manusmriti, also known as Manav Dharam Shastra, is a metrical work on Brahminical dharma in Hinduism and has been upheld as the ultimate guide to lead a moral life, the deviation of which is to be treated with serious negative sanctions. The text is so detailed that it covers all aspects of the lives of people belonging to all social strata. Manusmriti lays down the behavior and moral cords to be followed by both the superordinate and the subordinate. It also details the duties to be performed by women within the household, disregarding the possibility of women making a mark in the world outside the domain of the private sphere (Rao, 2005. Halder, 2008).

The Manusmriti is often criticized for being single-handedly responsible for the derogatory position given to women. Rajesh Karnal (2019) asserts, “A large number of scholars consider the Law of Manu as nothing but a hotchpotch” (Karnal, 2019, p. 5). However, the ubiquitous presence of women in Hindu texts can never be overlooked. In India, women have always been regarded as the guardians of dharma and transmitters of patriarchal values. The Vedas and Upanishads are replete with anecdotes of how gods and sages from time immemorial have created, used, and controlled women for their benefit and others' destruction.

According to the Manusmriti, a woman must obey her father first, and then, with her father's consent, she is handed over to her husband by her brother. The power of decision-making is never given to a woman (Halder, 2008). The text emphasizes the act of sacrifice as the core virtue expected of women. Women are portrayed as sacrificial entities, helpless and dependent on men from childhood until death. Furthermore, a woman must always be faithful and devoted to her husband. If this vow is broken, she is deemed a disgrace to society. Even after her husband's death, a second marriage is considered a sin. Manusmriti specifies, “After her husband is dead, she may voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flowers, roots, and fruits; but she must never mention even the name of another man” (Olivelle, 2005).

The text also promotes the idea that a woman who controls her speech is a “good woman,” and by following such virtues, she obtains fame in her family and society. A woman's social status depends on fulfilling duties toward her husband.

Additionally, Manusmriti has perpetuated harmful practices like child marriage and dowry. In contemporary India, these issues have manifested in tragic outcomes: every 93 minutes, a married woman is burned alive due to dowry or other social issues. While the Manusmriti allows a 40-year-old man to marry a girl half his age, it condemns a woman for engaging in similar actions. Such critical analyses of ancient texts like Manusmriti reveal that women have historically been prisoners of societal norms. Even in the 21st century, despite achieving and proving themselves, women continue to face struggles in breaking free from the subaltern position assigned to them.

Above all, it is argued that Manusmriti originally intended to respect women and their virtues, but over time, this respect transformed into control over women in all aspects of life. As Delhi High Court Judge Pratibha M. Singh

notes, “I think we are a blessed lot of women in India and the reason for that is our scriptures have always given a very respectable position for women, and Manusmriti itself says that if you don’t respect and honor women, all the pooja path that you may do has no meaning.”

### **Draupadi as Subaltern**

“Draupadi has five husbands- but she has none-

She had five sons- and was never a mother...

The Pandavas have given Draupadi ...

No joy, no sense of victory

No honor as wife

No respect as a mother

Only the status of a Queen ...

But they all have gone

And I’m left with a lifeless jewel

And an empty crown ...

My baffled motherhood

Wrings its hands and strives to weep”. (Syam, 1991)

In Mahabharata Draupadi experiences sacrifice and loss of herself respect as her five husbands discard her repeatedly. Being a princess and daughter of King Draupad she was humiliated and helpless in front of the whole court when her five Pandavas lost the game of dice against Kauravas. They were not able to protect her. For many years Draupadi, the king of Panchal had no children and to take vengeance on Dronacharya he performed tapas (rigorous ritual) day and night to God for the same. The first that emerged from the holy pyre was a son and then from the same fire, Draupadi emerged as a bonus. Therefore, she was born unasked and unwanted. As Draupadi was not born from her mother’s womb, she is also known to be the virgin goddess. The temple of Draupadi still exists in South India where she is been worshiped and praised as a virgin goddess.

Draupadi had no control over her life, she was the victim of the circumstances that took place. Getting married to five Pandavas was again not her choice. She was expected to love all of them equally. As Krishna was her beloved friend (Sakha) she asked him too, how is it possible to love all five of them mentally and emotionally. Krishna's answer was to spend one year with every husband turn by turn and during that period the rest of her husband were not allowed to have any sexual contact with her. Thus, Draupadi became a consort between them.



Her lifestyle eventually changes by adjusting according to her husband of the year. Although she was faithful to all her five husbands, on the other hand, they all had multiple wives including Arjun who married Krishna's sister Subhadra. She never received the love she wanted from Arjun. She was just managing her relationship dedicatedly as her cruel fate showed no mercy on her.

Draupadi was born from fire and was also called "Yajnaseni". Nevertheless, she was burned by the ill-treatment too. Yudhishtira was fond of gambling (game of dice) whereas Duryodhana tried to convince him to play. Yudhishtira kept on losing everything including his kingdom as well and at the end, he stakes Draupadi too. Even after arguing in front of the whole court, she was merely treated as a woman who was just an object for man's happiness. Her five strong husbands were sitting and crying with their heads bowed. Dushasana dragged Draupadi by her hair to disrobe her completely in front of the whole assembly. "(she) exploits the public space that she has access to through sexual humiliation" ("Draupadi's Disrobing", p.335). When Draupadi is brought to court, she appears "in her one garment, knotted below, weeping and in her courses" (MhB 2.27.59). She begged and appealed to the elders who were present in the court for some justice, but nobody stood for her. At the end, she called out Krishna for her help and miraculously the more Dushasana was pulling the saree the more cloth was covering Draupadi. Lord Krishna kept his promise to protect Draupadi as she tied a cloth once when Krishna had a wound on his finger.

After all these incidents Pandavas decided to take revenge on Duryodhana, eventually, the war of Kurukshetra took place where Bheema killed Dushasana, and he also broke the thigh of Duryodhana. The revenge was taken but the wounds that Draupadi experienced were not forgettable. Though Draupadi is seen standing strong throughout the cruel fate she has to take the support of men to take revenge for her insult even though they were the ultimate reason for putting themselves and Draupadi in that position.

Draupadi rises from the fire along with a supernatural prophecy that she will destroy evil warriors. Draupadi is always subjected to enduring violence: her Swayam Vara ends in conflict; her marriage with five men is enforced; Jayadratha and Keechaka attempt to rape her. These tragedies emphasize the hardships of Indian feminism, negotiating various aspects of protests throughout the centuries, emblematic of figures like Princess Sita and Draupadi (Luthra, 2014). She hoped to discover her missing mother in her mother-in-law but was tragically unsatisfied as Kunti thrusts her into a polyandrous marriage that exposed her to outrageous rumors reaching a horrendous climax in Karna labeling her a public woman whose being clothed or naked immaterial.

## Realities of Victimization

Mahasweta Devi attracted most of the contemporary writers of the Western world as her work is translated by the reputed literary critic, post-colonial theorist, and feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1988). Here, Spivak points out the limit of Western discourse in describing the

“other” that is the oppressed. According to Spivak Marxist ideologies ignore or destroy the subjectivity of the subaltern (Maggio, 2007, 422). Draupadi is a story from the collection of the “Breast Trilogy”. Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi is inspired by Mahabharata’s Draupadi but unlike the princess of Panchal, here Draupadi is portrayed as a lower caste tribal woman engaged in the Naxalite insurgency of the late 1960s. The peasant uprising of Naxalites increased at that time in northwest Bengal and further in other states of east India. Here, Dopdi has only one husband Dulna Manjhi who is killed by the army. Resistance is the key element of Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi. In the scene of disrobing Draupadi, she was struggling and begging for her protection whereas this Dopdi was fearless to stand naked in front of the government officials after she was raped multiple times by them. She refuses her naked body as shameful. It seemed that this act made her more resilient and powerful.

“Dopdi Mejhen, aged 27 years, is on a wanted list with the reward of 100 rupees on her head” (Draupadi, 2002, 19). She is projected as a “most notorious female” (Spivak, 19). Dopdi is not even able to pronounce her name “Draupadi” properly. But she resists herself profoundly. She shows her strength without literacy and fame. Mahasweta Devi showcases the marginalized and downtown communities are underestimated and mistreated. While running away and saving themselves, the other male comrades were encountered and killed but Dopdi’s punishment was different than her comrades- multiple rapes. “Draupadi” is a moving and thought-provoking story that confronts readers with the harsh realities of injustice and violence while celebrating the courage and resilience of individuals who stand up against it. As a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name (Draupadi)...her name is not on the list of appropriate names for tribal women...this pious, domesticated Hindu name was given Dopdi at birth by her mistress, in the usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor’s wife towards the tribal servant. (Spivak “Draupadi” 387)

“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?... There is not a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me –, and counter me –? Dopdi pushes Senanayake with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time, Senanayake is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid” (Spivak, pp.36-37). This seems to metaphorical expression of defiance against societal norms and expectations. Dopdi is constantly asking why she should conform or tie to a system that she views as oppressive and brutal towards her.

Both “Draupadi” and the Manipur violence incidents highlight the brutalities and injustices women face. In “Draupadi,” the protagonist is a tribal woman who becomes a victim of sexual violence by the security forces, which reflects the broader issue of abuse of power and gender-based violence. Similarly, the incidents in Manipur involve cases of violence and rape against women, illustrating the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the abuse of authority. Two tribal women were brutally gang-raped by upper-class men and were also paraded naked in the city of Imphal, Manipur. In both cases, there is a strong emphasis on the victims’ fight for justice. In “Draupadi,” the protagonist seeks justice for the atrocities committed against her, and her struggle symbolizes the larger struggle of marginalized communities against oppression. Similarly, the people of Manipur, especially women, have been demanding justice and accountability for the violence and rape incidents, often facing

challenges in their pursuit of justice. Mahasweta Devi's work emphasizes the importance of giving a voice to the marginalized and oppressed. The victims in "Draupadi" and the Manipur incidents both demand their voices be heard and their stories be acknowledged, highlighting the need for societal awareness and action. The stories in "Draupadi" and the real-life incidents in Manipur evoke a sense of social activism and solidarity. They inspire people to come together, raise their voices, and demand change. Both contexts showcase the power of collective action and the role of civil society in challenging injustice. Both instances have the potential to create awareness and bring about social change. "Draupadi" is a powerful literary work that has sparked discussions on gender, oppression, and power dynamics. Similarly, the Manipur incidents can catalyze broader conversations about gender violence, human rights, and the need for systemic reforms (Munsi, 2016 pp.12-15).

## CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* holds a stronger and more empowering message compared to ancient epic's *Draupadi*. In traditional *Mahabharata*, *Draupadi* is courageous, but she undergoes immense pain and suffering and ultimately the revenge is taken by the Pandavas. Her story deeply prevails in the moral and cosmic framework of the epic. Though inspiring, it cannot relate to the contemporary struggles of women where justice is not done irrespective of the community one belongs to. On the other hand, *Dopdi* then emerges from a more realistic and rawer social and political context as *Dopdi* faces sexual violence from those who were in power. Her will and boldness made her stand against the injustice and brutal realities which is still faced by today's women. She wanted to make everyone hear despite too many problems and lives at stake. This portrayal depicts the rallying cry for the women and it can be seen that women no matter how strong and independent, are treated as subalterns and therefore the subaltern cannot speak. This article was an attempt to prove that gendered subaltern has evolved over a period of time but the condition of suffering remains unhindered. Women being obedient to societal rules are considered polite and good "abla nari" (Bhat, 2022) that is how women are portrayed.

*Dopdi Meihen's* resistance and her fight against the political system inspire today's women and also give hope and empowerment to be fearless. The urge to provide justice for victims and survivors has often been a struggle as there are difficulties in accessing legal mechanisms and justice is hard to prevail in India. The tragedies highlight the conversation to provide systematic changes and reforms for improvements. Despite of too many challenges and problems, there are ongoing awareness campaigns, legal activism, and other initiatives to empower women and girls who provide justice.



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