

**“Make her. Do the needful”: A Comparative reading of the language of corporeality in selected short stories of Mahasweta Devi**

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**Abstract:**

The works of radical Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi use the subaltern as gendered-subject in an unprecedented manner in her stories. In portraying the treatment of women as objects of fetishization in her works, she intends to expose the farce that decolonization has meant for the indigenous communities of India. In her own words, “Decolonization has not reached the poor... Women are just merchandise, commodities”. This de-feminizing on her part is particularly reflected in the unornamental and non-poetic language that she uses in her writing and blends it with a deep sensitivity in representing human relationships that form the crux of all her narratives. I have selected two short stories that interrogate the grassroots social ideas of chastity of the woman’s body and the consequences of sexual violation or rape which have been eternally associated with the female body. Hence, the primary thesis of my paper is to analyse the theme of corporeality in two of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories, ‘Draupadi’ (1978) and ‘Dhowli’ (1979) respectively. While both works will be read in their translated versions for fluidity of comparison, I shall attempt a reading of the original Bengali texts in order to get a better grasp of Mahasweta’s ‘interventionist practice’ of disrupting conventional mainstream language.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Corporeality, Postcolonial Resistance, Language, Sexual violence.

**I**

The fact that Mahasweta Devi, the radical Indian-Bengali writer, structured most of her fictional narratives around tribulations of tribal lives in India, particularly tribal women, has often earned her the designation of being a ‘feminist’; a label she refused attaching to herself: “I write as a writer...not as a woman” (Katyal 16). She asserted time and again, that she captures the oppression of a collective ‘subaltern’ community, of which the woman is an integral part. She identifies the problems of subaltern women to be unique but prefers not to view the woman as a separate entity from the larger community. It goes without saying that

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Mahasweta Devi uses the subaltern as gendered-subject in an unprecedented manner in her stories. In portraying the treatment of women as objects of fetishization in her works, she intends to expose the farce that decolonization has meant for the indigenous communities of India. In her own words, “Decolonization has not reached the poor. This is why these things happen. Women are just merchandise, commodities” (Mahasweta Devi xx)

This de-feminizing on her part is particularly reflected in the unornamental and non-poetic language that she uses in her writing and blends it with a deep sensitivity in representing human relationships that form the crux of all her narratives. I have selected two particular short stories which interrogate the grassroots social ideas of chastity of the woman’s body and the consequences of sexual violation or rape which have been eternally associated with the female body. Hence, the primary thesis of my paper is to analyse the theme of corporeality in two of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories, ‘Draupadi’ (1978) and ‘Dhowli’ (1979) respectively. While both works will be read in their translated versions for fluidity of comparison, I shall attempt a reading of the original Bengali texts in order to get a better grasp of Mahasweta’s ‘interventionist practice’ of disrupting conventional mainstream language.

For the sake of clarity, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section will examine the rhetoric of rape in each of the texts, where the female body eventually becomes the site of her defiant resistance against sexual exploitation. The complex relationship between men and women that Mahasweta captures in her narratives is a dynamic power-struggle, which unsettles and vitiates both, while the latter who is more oppressed than the former marks her triumphant subaltern agency in the greater order of things. The second section is dedicated to Mahasweta’s usage of a distinct lexicon in the native language; a language rooted in local culture and visceral enough to never let the reader forget about the primitiveness of the setting and the miserable conditions of its people. I read such social and linguistic resistance as a form of ‘affirmative sabotage’ (Spivak) executed by the gendered subaltern.

Spivak’s idea of the ‘sexual differential’ is similar to Ranajit Guha’s stratification of the subaltern existing on the plane of ‘identity-in-differential’ (the equation goes something like: Total Indian population minus the dominant indigenous/upper class elite = subaltern

people). Sexual differential therefore is, the realisation of what makes a woman different from a man is, essentially, her sexuality and the aspects of its perception in society. This realisation then shapes her social, economic and political subjectivity as well as her relations with the community, and the nation-state in general. We shall also see, how much of this theorisation does Mahasweta's stories advocate or subvert, during the course of textual analysis. Reading the above two sections consecutively, while keeping the idea of negotiating sexual differential in mind, would facilitate our understanding of how Mahasweta's perspective and rhetorical engagement weaves a 'counter-discourse' in the face of dominant ideologies of exploitation and gendered subalternity.

## II

### The 'Other's' Corporeality as a Threat To The Center

Critical scholar Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in her seminal work, *Real and Imagined Women*, discusses how in the histories of postcolonial developing countries, discourses of gender inequities, gender oppressions and caste-based discriminations are in constant conflict with the State (7). In Indian history, this violent confrontation is most visibly seen in the government's conflict with the tribal population of India. These dispossessed people mostly comprised of the victims of perpetual feudal-capital oppression – bonded labours, landless peasants- are further relegated to the background by being deprived of the rights of citizenship. Even though the tribals (Scheduled Tribes) comprise 8.6% of India's population (according to the 2011 census), the State fails to secure them with basic means of survival, which is land, food and education. Sunder Rajan asserts that when the hegemonic domination fails accomplishment by means of 'politico-ideological control', the oppressive State resorts to means of violence (5). A major share of this violence translates into sexual violence when confronting women resisters. It is from this 'oppressed space' that Mahasweta Devi writes her stories.

The Naxalbari uprising of 1967 was one such political struggle ignited by the landless peasants against the dominant landlords and moneylenders in parts of West Bengal and Bihar. Several anti-Naxalite operations were launched by the government to suppress the rebellion,

which resulted in third-degree tortures and merciless killings of tribal folks. Mahasweta locates her story 'Draupadi' in such a charged atmosphere—in the year 1971, after the failure of Operation Bakuli, in which the main culprits, Dopdi (a Santal variation of the name 'Draupadi') and her husband Dulna, a Santal rebel-couple, hoodwinked the army by faking their death and escaped into the Jharkhani forest of Jharkhand. To fast forward the story, in the present, Dulna has been tracked down and shot dead; now, apprehending Dopdi would be a significant step for this operation to be a success. It is at this climactic moment that the competent army chief, Senanayak is summoned to lead Operation Jharkhani. This man, Senanayak, whom Mahasweta introduces as the, "...specialist in combat and Left-politics" (Spivak 258), is the textbook exemplar of ideological imagination transitioning into material accomplishment. In Mahasweta's text thus, Draupadi and Senanayak, the man and the woman respectively, belong to two entirely different poles of ideology, belief and methods of combat.

From the very beginning, Mahasweta emphasizes on the corporeal aspects of warfare which are inherent both within Draupadi and Senanayak, albeit with separate methodologies. Whereas the army chief believes in combat by perceiving the Other's workings of the mind, "...in order to destroy the enemy, become one", Draupadi, and the Santal tribe in general are believed to be born warriors for generations, fighting with primitive weapons like the bow and arrow, hatchet and scythe (Spivak 259). But that does not let Senanayak look down upon them even once. In fact, he is quite explicitly shown to be nurturing a sense of respect for the enemy, at least ideologically. So much so that when Dopdi is finally caught and apprehended, Senanyak's act of instructing his soldiers to 'make her', that is torturing her physically in order to extract verbal confession, comes off as a moment of consternation for the reader. The plot is structured in such a way of progression that the fact of Sennanyak resorting to rape as a 'war strategy', barely finds favor with the readers, almost to the degree of being an un-militant strategy of combat and an act of cowardice. The audience gets an impression that a man of Senanayak's ideological capabilities deserves a better standing than being called an immoral facilitator of rape (he does not rape Dopdi himself, but lets his men do it, as the story indicates).

To counter the audience's impression, it is crucial to remember the historical legitimacy of sexual violence used by the Pakistani opponents in the Bangladesh Liberation War, as a strategic method of suppressing the freedom movement. That was the year 1971 and ironically, Mahasweta's story is also situated in the same year. She, therefore, makes the readers aware of how rape for the competent Senanayak is nothing more than a strategy of weakening or vitiating the enemy's willpower; it is not a feeder of his lust, but a corporeal destruction of the opponent. However, the author uses this very legitimacy of sexual violence to subvert the glorification of heteronormativity and *re-presents* a powerful rhetoric of retaliation by the gendered subject. In the forest, when Dopdi suspects of somebody following her, she is already in a state of anticipating her arrest and is coming to terms with the consequences that would follow: "When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed; your sex is a terrible wound" (263). The author portrays the subaltern woman as conscious of her sexuality (and hence 'sexual differential') and how that would serve towards her 'different treatment' in the hands of the police than the apprehensions of other Naxalite men.

Mahasweta's graphic description of Dopdi's raped body is imbued with a language of crudity. It is explicit, unsettling and visually disturbing. The description is a rewriting of the mythical Draupadi's 'disrobing' episode in the Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata*. Draupadi's honor was saved by Krishna's divine intervention whereas in this dark, apocalyptic world, nobody but the subaltern woman herself must emerge as her own 'saviour'. This is the message that Mahasweta Devi intends to convey and which Spivak articulates in her 'Foreword' to the story:

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi...Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops (252).

When Dopdi is summoned the next morning to the army chief's tent, and asked to put on her clothes, she defies the orders and instead begins tearing her saree to pieces with her mouth. This cannibalistic behaviour and her mutilated 'black' body are horrific sights to behold for Senanayak and his soldiers. As the body approaches him, for the first time, as Mahasweta

writes, "...Senanayak is afraid to stand in front of an *unarmed target*. Terribly afraid" (269). Draupadi's derisive address of herself as the 'object of your search' is the point where she overcomes her sexual differential (Spivak 252) and subverts the traditional, heteronormative conventions of the shame of rape to be entirely associated with the woman's dignity and honor. On the contrary, the woman's raped body puts her perpetrators to shame and becomes the site of subaltern agency.

Written just a year after 'Draupadi', 'Dhowli' is a complex tale of caste-based economic and sexual exploitation of a community, in general and Dhowli the tribal woman, in particular. I regard the narration to be complex because here the terror of corporeal annihilation is subsumed within the rhetoric of romantic love. Alan Badiou in his fantastic philosophical insight on love writes that love is not merely an "exchange of mutual favors" but an "event of difference" which permeates through impenetrable areas of the world and leads to the idea of experiencing the world through difference (17). Dhowli, the Dusad widow (an untouchable tribal caste) is involved in a romantic liaison with the upper-caste Brahman boy Misrilal and is impregnated by him. The immense difference of social class is capitulated by Mahasweta's stern language, wherein she focuses on the idea that while the two lovers initially give in to the temptations of innocent love, disregarding their caste-class discrepancy, this relationship is short-lived. It is an illicit relationship that is not acceptable to anyone in the village, not even her own community. The consummation of Dhowli and Misrilal's love is a metaphor for bridging the worldly difference that Badiou states only true love is capable of censuring. The theme of love conflicting with materialism of the world as a result of social difference is pervasive in Mahasweta's stories. Thus, in this story, Dhowli's rape is not a literal one, because, as the villagers say "...she gave herself to him of her own accord" (Bardhan 198) and hence she is abolished to the 'periphery of the periphery'.

The author describes Dhowli's despair in relation to her body. From the initial consciousness of "her slender waist, budding breasts" being her enemy to the 'pain under her chest', to how the Brahmin men would eat off pieces from her body if seen alone, and the Dusad men waiting to attack her as soon as the Misra boy abandons her (189). Even the child in Dhowli's womb is constantly referred to as a 'thorn' by her own mother. Later when Misrilal returns to the village, Dhowli refers to herself as a 'corpse' (194). The careful usage

of selective words that in this work which exude a sense of corporeality more than a sense of spirit in this work, draws attention to the reproductive body of the subaltern which is a source of rampant sexual trafficking in India, implying its economic utility. The words construct a world where all human relationships are perceived in terms of the predator-prey equation and are legitimised by both the upper-caste due to their domineering superiority as well as the lower-caste for their economic and social powerlessness.

On the lines of maintaining the status quo, Dhowli offers her final resistance also through her body, in the face of severe adversities. It is her own choice to keep the baby in her womb, to not succumb to suicide as the villagers, her mother and Misrilal himself would suggest and her penultimate decision to use her body as a commodity to support herself and her family economically. In an exploitative arrangement such as this, Dhowli is expected to render her services through the capitalization of her body. By depicting prostitution as a post-modern form of transaction of labor and capital, Mahasweta foregrounds the perils of capitalism that glosses sexual exploitation as an extension of historical and feudal oppression of women. Kalpana Bardhan summarizes this historical continuity of exploitation very aptly:

In a stratified society, discrimination of wages and jobs/occupation by caste and sex is not a feudal remnant but perfectly consistent with the play of market forces (5).

The last blow on Dhowli's fate comes in the form of her ostracization from the village to the city of Dhanbad where she will be joining professional prostitutes and register herself officially as one of them. And yet Dhowli takes this blow with immense fortitude. Her interior monologue towards the end is an assertion of her agency where the practices of female reification in a capitalistic market are more acceptable to her than being exploited by the Brahmans of her village, both sexually and economically. For in that case, "...she would have been a whore individually, only in her private life. Now she is going to be a whore by occupation...a member of a part of a society" (205). Mahasweta's Marxist dimension as a writer emerges here, in delineating the gendered subaltern not just as a sexed-subject but also as an oppressed class-subject.

## III

**Linguistic Disruption of The Center in ‘Draupadi’ and ‘Dhowli’.**

Mahasweta Devi was a twentieth century woman writer who derived the content of her works from real life. Having witnessed several cataclysmic events of Indian history and politics, such as the Partition in 1947, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the onslaught of the Naxalite movement in 1967, it is the disenfranchisement of the tribal communities in the country that captured most of her attention. Being an investigative journalist apart from a writer and an activist, there is a unique interplay of social activism and literary writing in her works. And yet her literary writings are not literary in the true sense of the word; they are structured in the shape of a report and are always mediated by a language that is a bizarre blend of regional, national, and even international ideas as well as speech. Minoli Salgado in her critique of the politics of translating Mahasweta Devi’s works, comments:

Not only is the surface realism of her stories destabilized by mythic and satiric configurations, but the language used itself is unfixed, incorporating a mixture of folk dialects and urbane Bengali, slang and Shakespeare, Hindu mythology and quotations from Marx (132).

Such an eclectic use of sources in her language calls for a distinctive narrative style which we shall unpack in the two stories. However, one might be curious to know the reason behind the author bringing about such a linguistic disruption. The reason I find most palpable is that Mahasweta’s language intends to interrupt the flow of conventional reading. Clearly, the language employed in both ‘Draupadi’ and ‘Dhowli’ is not straightforward but rather a specific kind of linguistic construction intended to cause a rupture in ordinary lexicon. It is more grounded in reality of the native tribes, whom Mahasweta Devi characterizes as “suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century” (*Imaginary Maps* xi). Having worked closely with the tribes in the interior parts, she identified the folk language being mixed with the urban style of speech and even English, the colonizer’s language, which the tribals have picked up in their interactions with the local government and travel to the cities. The inevitable contact of the rural population with modern civilization is implicated here.



Whereas 'Draupadi' is replete with instances of English words being used frequently instead of their Bengali equivalents, and where both languages are almost in a state of strife with each other, the unique amalgamation of Bengali and native Hindi dialect in 'Dhowli' drags the story closer to the reality of speech registers typical of the specific geography. Since 'Draupadi' is set in the Santal-occupied regions of Jharkhand and West Bengal, we find a mix of Santali dialect mixed with standard Bengali in the tribal's speech. This is also an indicator of the chasm which exists between the tribal population and the army (or the nationalist bourgeoisie), who have better access to English, the foreign language and hence use it in their everyday conversations. On the contrary, 'Dhowli' is situated in the interior parts of Ranchi, also known as the Palamu region. The native language in that area is Hindi, which is also the language that the Brahmin landlords use. Hence, we find the conversations in the text taking place in a multilingual manner but used unanimously by both the lower caste as well as the upper caste speakers. The reader's linguistic unsettlement while reading the stories is a metaphor for the existential crisis experienced by the tribal communities with respect to their native languages which are on the verge of extinction. The author's intention in bringing these multiple languages together and deploying them in the stories in order to highlight the wide cultural difference is nothing short of path-breaking:

Through the hybridity of English and Bengali, Mahasweta Devi is able to construct a piece that tells of the both the tribal people attempting to hold on to their traditions while a neo-colonizing force creates new narratives for India through physical and linguistic changes. (Andersen 122).

Language is the greatest expression of one's identity and such a mixed vernacular symbolizes a disrupted, confused and hyphenated existence that the tribal communities lead in postcolonial modern India.

Mahasweta's careful use of selective words, as mentioned before, comprise a major portion of her perceptions on social problems that exist in Indian society. It is therefore crucial to give specific attention to the usage of Bengali words that defy the traditional moral reasonings that was expected of a woman writer of her generation. Salman Rushdie thoughtfully says in one of his novels, *Shame* (1983) that in order to know a society fully, it is imperative to concentrate on its 'untranslatable words' (104). Mahasweta's works have been

a topic of interest globally now and have been translated into multiple languages by several translators. The translated versions which I have read are by Gayatri Spivak ('Draupadi') and Kalpana Bardhan ('Dhowli'); two well-known scholars who have done commendable jobs in retaining the rustic flavors of Mahasweta's original language while trying to fit them into a literary discourse of global readership.

In the first story, towards the end when Dopdi musters up courage and retorts back to Senanayak, when he that she be produced in front of him covering her body, "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (269), the Bengali word for 'strip' that Mahasweta uses is much more savage and visceral, which is '*langta*'- a word that is considered vulgar and hence is refrained from being used openly in a civilized Bengali society. But Mahasweta insists on using the outrageous word instead of its erudite Bengali equivalent which should be '*ullangha*' (naked). The two Bengali terms mean the same and yet one stands for the physical nakedness of the body whereas the other word, *langta*, implies every kind of violation of the civil code. The intent for the author to use the latter term is to attack the very perceptions of a civil society which invests the raped body with metaphors of shame, humiliation and violence. Similarly, in 'Dhowli', the moment of Dhowli's decision to descend into selling her body for survival is expressed in extremely crude language. She asks her first customer to bring money and corn by saying, "I am not selling on credit" (202). Bardhan makes the hard-hitting original statement ("*Jodi dukaan khuli toh daam nibo na?*") quite mellow in her translation. The literal translation of Mahasweta's language would have been, "if I open the shop, won't I take the price for it?", where the woman conceives of her body as a 'shop' or brothel in this case, meant for carrying out commercial exchanges.

#### IV

#### **'Otherness' As A Counter-Discourse: Language & Sexuality**

Mahasweta's strength as a writer derives much from her iconoclastic attitude towards an oppressive government that denies recognition to the tribal population as belonging to mainstream society. In her interview with Gabrielle Collu, she insists on the tribals being bestowed with a separate 'tribal identity' that shall be constitutive of a bigger 'indian'



nationality (148). Mahasweta reminds the readers in Spivak's foreword to her collection of short stories, *Imaginary Maps* (1995), how *The Ramayana* contains evidence of the indigenous tribes being the original dwellers of Indian soil much before the Aryan invasions happened (ix). Her mode of writing derives from the ancient history of India that boasts about an all-inclusive culture of humanity and thus, the writings scathingly critique the government's constant denial of the historical truth as well as a discourse of collective resistance that the oppressed tribals launch against that denial. Language plays a significant role for this purpose of collective resistance.

Language for Mahasweta, has a specific function of causing a deliberate rupture in the make-belief harmony of a standardized vernacular. When Eduoard Glissant, the renowned Martinican critic-theorist talks in his seminal work on colonialism, called *Discourse of Colonialism*, about how language should be used as a tool for identifying the ambiguities inherent in the subaltern's history, he means that to be the beginnings of constructing a situation where the imposed language must be used by the subaltern for his own self-expression, and which might result in the creation of a 'counter-poetics' against the colonizer in the near future (163). Mahasweta Devi's language, in a similar vein, attempts to penetrate the master's linguistic territory (the bourgeoisie or the colonizer), and twists it around to make it her own. The 'master' here is technically everyone who is in a state of opposition with the tribal communities of India, and not just the police or the feudal landlords who are just minor agents of a bigger colonial domination. Thus, it is not a coincidence that in the first short story, the only English word which Dopdi, an illiterate, learns in her perception of the army's ruthless treatment of the Naxalites, is *counter* (269), which is an abridged form of 'encounter'. It is an act of merciless 'shoot-at-sight' tactic used by the soldiers to eliminate the Naxalites and entails a climactic termination of the mobilization of the Naxal movement. Dopdi's husband, Dulna also had been a victim of the army's 'encounter' and thus the word means the end of everything for Dopdi Mejhén. Therefore, when she audaciously challenges Senanayak to 'counter' her (269), meaning to shoot and kill her, one is bound to wonder whether Dopdi knows the 'real' implication of the word, which is that she might not be alive anymore to challenge Senanayak's masculinity. Spivak re-articulates this confusion by asking, "What is it to 'use' a language 'correctly', without 'knowing' it"? (255). While

Dopdi might not know the latent danger in her courageous retort, Mahasweta certainly is well-aware of the articulation of the subaltern woman's resistance against the privileged man. Her use of language therefore can be read as an expression of subaltern 'counter-poetics'.

I read this interventionist method of forging a counter-poetics for the subaltern woman as a form of Mahasweta Devi's fictional 'affirmative sabotage', which Spivak describes as a 'gloss over the usual meaning of sabotage: that is the deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside', in one of Spivak's interviews with *New York Times* (2016). In other words, 'affirmative sabotage', for Spivak means entering the master's discourse that one is criticizing fully and using it to twist it around from the inside. The examples of such a deliberate problematization can be found in the two short stories that I have read in this paper. The strategy of using Dopdi's raped body as symbolic of asserting social power instead of the conventional rhetoric of male sexual desire, allows the author to "reconstitute... the female subject of rape" (Maan 136). Sunder Rajan points out the numerous ways of such a reconstitution:

"...by representing the raped woman as one who becomes a subject *through* rape rather than merely one subjected to its violation...by locating the raped woman in structures of oppression other than heterosexual 'romantic' relationships...and finally by counting the cost of rape for its victim in terms more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence" (76-7).

Rajan's re-definition of romantic relationships further leads us to wonder how Mahasweta Devi in all her fictions, abstains from romanticizing the subaltern woman and instead focuses on reading the woman's exploitation in relation to her caste and class. The impeccable research that she does for each of her literary works, enforces the idea that looking separately at the gender problem does not lead to any sort of resolution. On the contrary, subsuming the gender problem within the discourse of class and caste would magnify the systemic oppression that the tribal communities have been subjected to since a long time. This aspect becomes particularly visible in 'Dhowli', where the relationship between the privileged Brahmin landlords and the Dusad community of bonded labor is one of endless domination. Because Dhowli belongs to a lower caste as well as class than the Misra boy, it takes almost next to no time for the privileged class to oust her from the village. Mahasweta does not

dismiss the angle of romantic love altogether towards the end, in that she leaves the Misra boy's feelings for Dhowli to be alien for the readers. Her larger motive is to imply that it is the wide caste-class divide between the 'lovers' that would never let the reader de-code or even come close to decoding whether there ever existed any sort of genuine love between the two. In such a de-sentimentalized depiction, it would not be an exaggeration perhaps to call Mahasweta a hyper-realist author, one who is striving to design a counter-discourse of radical resistance and for whom even an iota of romanticism could prove detrimental to this design, by dragging the reader into an idyllic setting.

In all of Mahasweta Devi's fictions and particularly in the two short stories that I have considered here, there is a very explicit foregrounding of corporeality in describing the constitution of the subaltern woman, her 'displaced space' of existence and the ways of resistance that she can offer from that space. We might call it the author's counter-sentence, counter-discourse or counter-poetics, but the purpose of all these concept-metaphors remains the same: the gendered subaltern making her insurgent presence felt within the hegemonic discourse. It is Dopdi's and Dhowli's 'affirmative sabotage', that punctures the masculinist ideology of invading the female body as a means of crushing the woman's agency. And therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Mahasweta Devi executes this task by means of her corporeal language.

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