

Violence, Power, and the Politics of the Body in *Draupadi*

¹B. Magdaline Sreeja Josephin, ²Dr. M.P.Ganesan

¹(Reg.No. MKU21PFOL10034)

Part time Research Scholar in English

PG and Research Department of English

Sourashtra college (Autonomous)

(Affiliated Madurai Kamaraj University)

Madurai-625004, Tamil Nadu, India.

E-mail: phdsreeja2020@gmail.com

²Assistant professor, PG and Research Department of English

Sourashtra college (Autonomous)

(Affiliated Madurai Kamaraj University)

Madurai-625004, Tamil Nadu. India.

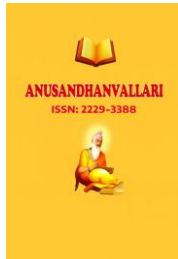
Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a profound narrative that explores the themes of violence, power, and the politics of the body, particularly through the experiences of Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal woman and a revolutionary involved in the Naxalite movement. Devi's depiction of Dopdi's body as both a site of violence and resistance challenges the traditional notions of victimhood and empowerment. The story uncovers the intersectional oppression faced by women of marginalized communities, highlighting how state-sponsored violence, particularly sexual violence, is used to silence and control. However, Devi also portrays how Dopdi reclaims her body as a space of defiance, asserting her agency through an act of radical resistance. This paper analyzes Dopdi's struggle and explores the subaltern's silent yet powerful resistance, shedding light on the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions on gender, violence, and political resistance. By examining Devi's work through a feminist and postcolonial lens, the paper underscores how the female body becomes a battleground for power, identity, and liberation.

Keywords: Violence, power, resistance, subaltern, body politics, gender, post colonialism, feminist theory, Naxalite movement, sexual violence, agency, empowerment

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a remarkable work that delves deeply into the intersection of violence, power, and the politics of the body. Through the character of Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal woman and a Naxalite revolutionary, Devi presents a poignant critique of the state's systematic oppression and violence against marginalized communities, especially women. The narrative unfolds in the politically charged atmosphere of the Naxalite movement, where Dopdi's act of resistance becomes a powerful symbol of defiance against an unjust system. Devi's story is both a reflection on gender violence and an exploration of how the body becomes a battleground for power and resistance. This article seeks to analyze the intricate ways in which



Draupadi reconfigures the concept of victimhood and empowerment, showcasing how the female body becomes a site of both suffering and revolt.

The story of Dopdi Mejhen is not only about personal suffering but a larger critique of the forces that try to silence and destroy dissent. The treatment of her body, through sexual violence, dehumanization, and subsequent resistance, offers a searing commentary on the structural inequalities of caste, class, and gender. This article will explore the multifaceted themes of violence, resistance, and agency that Mahasweta Devi brings to the forefront, positioning the female body as both a space of vulnerability and resistance in the face of oppressive power.

Violence as a Tool of State Power

In *Draupadi*, Devi vividly captures the brutality of state-sponsored violence, particularly sexual violence, as a tool of political control. Dopdi, a tribal woman and revolutionary, is caught in the crossfire of a violent conflict between the state and marginalized groups. The state's brutal response to her rebellion is not just an individual act of retaliation but a reflection of a larger political agenda aimed at suppressing dissent and ensuring compliance.

Devi's portrayal of Dopdi's assault underscores the deep connection between gendered violence and political power. By stripping Dopdi of her clothes, the state attempts to strip her of her dignity, her identity, and her autonomy. The violation of her body becomes a symbolic act of subjugation. The brutalization of her body is framed as an attempt to reassert the state's dominance over both her and the community she represents.

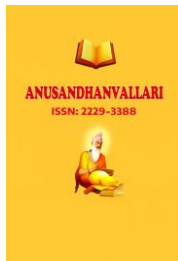
When the soldiers humiliate Dopdi, they try to dehumanize her and strip her of her agency. The powerful line from the text, "*They stripped her. How can you clothe her again? Are you a man?*" demonstrates the twisted logic of the oppressors. The stripping of her body is not only about the violation of her personal space but also an assertion of power that aligns with the state's objective to erase her resistance. However, this act also exposes the vulnerability of those in power. By treating her as an object to be violated, they unwittingly expose the precariousness of their authority, revealing that it relies on violence and control.

The state's violence against Dopdi highlights the intersectionality of oppression. As a tribal woman, she is marginalized both by her gender and her social class. Her body is doubly targeted—first as a woman, whose body is always already a site of control, and second, as a tribal rebel, whose existence threatens the political and social order. In this context, violence is not just an act of domination but a systemic mechanism designed to silence those who resist, especially women from marginalized communities. Dopdi's oppression becomes symbolic of the larger historical processes of colonial and postcolonial exploitation, where indigenous bodies have long been subjected to control, violence, and erasure.

The Body as a Site of Resistance

While Dopdi's body is subjected to violence, it ultimately becomes a site of resistance. Devi presents the female body not just as a victim but as a space for radical defiance. In one of the most poignant moments of the story, after being brutally raped and humiliated, Dopdi refuses to cover herself and walks naked in front of her captors. This act is a profound rejection of the state's attempt to shame and silence her. Rather than submit to the humiliation of sexual violence, Dopdi uses her body as a powerful symbol of resistance.

Dopdi's nakedness is not a sign of defeat but an act of reclaiming her power. Through her refusal to be clothed, Dopdi subverts the typical association of nakedness with shame. In a deeply patriarchal society, a



woman's body is often seen as her most vulnerable space. The narrative reveals how society controls women by dictating the terms under which they can exist in the world—through their bodies. By walking naked into the presence of her captors, Dopdi refuses to adhere to these imposed norms. She renders the violence enacted upon her powerless by not submitting to the shame that it aims to impose. Her famous words, "You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"

are an accusation, a challenge to her captors' power. She is not asking for sympathy but for acknowledgment. Her nakedness becomes an act of defiance, one that forces her oppressors to confront the violence they have inflicted. The act of stripping off her clothes represents a refusal to be objectified—her body ceases to be a passive recipient of violence and becomes an active tool for resistance.

This shift in the meaning of the body is significant. The violence that was meant to humiliate her and make her powerless is turned on its head. By reclaiming her body, Dopdi challenges the entire logic of the system that seeks to dominate and control her. Her act of resistance speaks volumes about the strength of her spirit and the power of the body as a site of resistance. It challenges us to rethink traditional notions of victimhood and agency, showing that even in the most extreme circumstances, the body can be a tool for asserting autonomy and defiance.

Subaltern Identity and Feminist Agency

One of the central concerns of *Draupadi* is the exploration of subaltern identity and the complexities of feminist agency. Dopdi, as a member of the Santhal tribal community, is doubly marginalized. She faces oppression not only because of her gender but also because of her tribal status. This social positioning complicates her ability to speak or act within dominant frameworks, yet Devi's narrative provides a platform for Dopdi to assert her own voice.

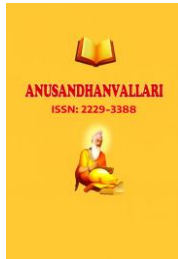
In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the subaltern, particularly the subaltern woman, is often silenced by both colonial structures and patriarchal norms. Dopdi, in her silence and her defiance, speaks to this silencing. Her refusal to engage with her captors on their terms is an act of speaking through silence. Spivak's claim that the subaltern is unable to "speak" within the dominant narrative is subverted by Dopdi's action. Her nakedness is a language of protest—a refusal to accept the violence and degradation imposed upon her. She speaks not through words but through the act of resistance itself.

Dopdi's silence, her refusal to beg or plead, challenges the expectations placed upon women to perform vulnerability and submission. Her silence speaks more powerfully than any words could. It is not a silence of passivity but a silence of resistance. It forces those in power to reckon with her and, by extension, with the system they represent. Dopdi's silence is a form of subversion, a rejection of the narratives that seek to define and silence her.

Symbolism of Nakedness and Silence

The symbolism of nakedness in *Draupadi* is rich with layers of meaning. In many cultures, particularly within patriarchal societies, a woman's body is often viewed as the ultimate site of honor and shame. The violation of the body, therefore, represents the most extreme form of subjugation. However, Dopdi's act of walking naked in front of her captors subverts this tradition. Her nakedness is not about shame but about power. She forces her captors to look at her as she is—broken but unbowed. The power dynamics are reversed when Dopdi, in her vulnerability, exhibits an unmatched strength.

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>



Silence, too, serves as a potent symbol in the story. While her body is subjected to violence, Dopdi's refusal to speak represents her rejection of the victim status that her captors expect her to assume. In her silence, she asserts a powerful autonomy. She challenges the assumption that silence equals submission. Her silence becomes an act of protest, an assertion of agency in the face of immense violence. The symbolism of both nakedness and silence in *Draupadi* is critical to understanding the complex ways in which the body is politicized in moments of extreme violence.

Relevance in Contemporary Discourse

The themes explored in *Draupadi* remain incredibly relevant in contemporary discussions about gender violence, state oppression, and resistance. In many parts of the world, particularly in conflict zones, women's bodies continue to be sites of violence. The intersectionality of caste, gender, and class oppression that Dopdi experiences in the story mirrors the struggles faced by women in marginalized communities today. Sexual violence remains a widespread tool of political subjugation, as seen in various global conflicts. Dopdi's story speaks to the resilience of women who continue to fight back against systems of power that seek to control their bodies.

In the wake of movements like #MeToo, Dopdi's story serves as a powerful reminder of the ways in which women's bodies are politicized and violated, and how they continue to fight for their autonomy and dignity. Her defiance in the face of violence speaks to a universal struggle against the exploitation of the female body.

Conclusion

Draupadi by Mahasweta Devi is a powerful exploration of the violence, power, and resistance that shape the female experience. Dopdi's body, subjected to the worst forms of violence, becomes a site of radical resistance, forcing us to rethink the dynamics of power, victimhood, and agency. Through her refusal to conform to societal norms and her reclaiming of her body, Dopdi becomes a symbol of resistance that transcends the specific context of the Naxalite movement. In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi offers a searing critique of the systems that perpetuate violence against marginalized bodies, while also providing a powerful vision of resistance and agency. Dopdi's story continues to resonate today, reminding us of the importance of reclaiming both our bodies and our voices in the face of oppression.

References

1. Devi, Mahasweta. *Draupadi*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1995.
2. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994.
3. Sarkar, Tanika. "The Female Body as a Site of Protest: A Study of *Draupadi*." *Indian Literature and Resistance*, 2003.
4. Nandy, Ashis. "The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism." Oxford University Press, 1983.