



Revisiting Draupadi: Trauma, Caste, and Agency in Mahasweta Devi's Narrative

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17921516>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 19-11-2025

Published: 10-12-2025

Keywords:

Trauma; Dalit Feminism; Caste Violence; Gendered Oppression; Subaltern Agency; Mahasweta Devi; Draupadi.

ABSTRACT

Trauma emerges when individuals face extreme violence or oppression that disrupts their sense of identity and overwhelms their emotional capacity. Trauma theory emphasizes this rupture—an experience that resists articulation and exposes the gap between lived reality and linguistic expression. For marginalized communities, such trauma cannot be separated from the socio-cultural, geographic, and economic conditions that shape their collective existence. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, from the collection *Agnigarbha* and translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, offers a powerful representation of this dynamic through the lived experiences of Dalit and tribal women. The story foregrounds how systemic caste and gender-based violence inflict persistent psychological and bodily trauma, while also revealing moments of defiance that reclaim dignity and agency. This paper examines the layered trauma of Dalit women in *Draupadi* and explores how Devi's narrative exposes structures of oppression while simultaneously charting the possibilities of resistance.

Introduction:-

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* unfolds against the historical backdrop of Bengal's long-standing tribal subjugation. Even after the formal end of British colonial rule, the trauma endured by marginalized



communities persists, reinforced by their continued dependence on new structures of power. It is deeply troubling that, even after more than seven decades of independence, these communities still confront systemic injustice. Devi's narrative captures this grim reality through the conflict between state forces—who exploit and brutalize the tribal population—and the tribal people themselves, who are often driven to violence as a consequence of relentless oppression. A community deeply connected to nature is compelled to endure profound trauma, at times resulting in acts of desperate and insurgent resistance.

Draupadi narrates the transformation of a tribal woman from a state of bondage to a fierce assertion of freedom. Within this framework, the protagonist's struggle becomes a powerful justification of her resistance against systemic oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, observes that “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow compared to her male counterpart” (287). *Draupadi*'s story vividly embodies this insight, and her profound suffering continues to resonate deeply with scholars in gender and feminist studies, who view her experiences as emblematic of the compounded marginalization faced by subaltern women.

Women have historically been subjected to sexual violence during times of war, with rape repeatedly deployed as a deliberate tool of domination—from ancient conflicts such as the Trojan War to contemporary wars in the Middle East. In such contexts, women become primary targets of militarized aggression, their bodies turned into battlegrounds for political and ideological power. This persistent vulnerability exposes them to profound and enduring trauma. As Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser asserts, the ruling class maintains control over the oppressed through repressive state apparatuses, a framework that illuminates how systemic violence is mobilized to subjugate marginalized groups, particularly women.

In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi depicts the tribal woman Dopdi Mejhen as a vivid, flesh-and-blood figure who refuses to succumb to the oppressive violence wielded by the state, embodied in the character of Senanayak. “Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it” (401) Although she endures brutal atrocities and her body is pushed to its physical limits, her spirit remains unbroken even when the police dehumanize her to the level of an animal. Devi presents a starkly realistic portrait of a woman whose resilience defies the very intention of her oppressors. Rather than being psychologically shattered, Dopdi transforms her violated body into a site of resistance, confronting her perpetrators with an unprecedented assertion of agency. This climactic act exposes the deeply patriarchal mindset that treats women as objects of



conquest and reinforces the narrative's critique of gendered and state-sanctioned violence. "the State is nothing more than a committee tasked with overseeing the Bourgeoisie's common concerns" (405).

The machinery of the state often functions to subdue those who lack power. In *Draupadi*, this is evident in the state's protection of landowners like Surja Sahu while simultaneously repressing impoverished tribal communities who struggle only to preserve their livelihood. The systematic denial of indigenous people's natural rights reflects an intentional strategy of dispossession. Mahasweta Devi underscores how both the ruling class and state institutions perceive marginalized groups as threats and, therefore, deploy terror, trauma, and coercion to secure their dominance within a hegemonic order. The state's panoptic presence infiltrates even the most elemental aspects of tribal life, disrupting their traditional social structures. Devi suggests that beneath this oppression lies a latent current of resistance—an uprising waiting to surface once the people become aware of their collective strength.

Dopdi Mejhen, the widow of a revolutionary activist who was executed by state forces, remains committed to his political ideals out of both love and a sense of collective responsibility. Although she initially appears to function as a modest Naxalite informant, her defining moment emerges in the aftermath of her assault—when she refuses to clothe herself. At the climax of the story, the Army officer Senanayak authorizes her rape, yet Dopdi, despite enduring repeated violations, chooses to remain naked, defiantly declaring, "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again?" (402). Her refusal becomes a powerful act of resistance, transforming the site of trauma into one of confrontation and agency. In a patriarchal society where rape is often equated with masculine power and dominance, this act destabilizes the very foundations of that ideology, exposing how sexual violence is used as a mechanism of control and psychological subjugation.

Dopdi develops a renewed understanding of her identity and actively challenges the very notion of trauma as imposed by patriarchal and state power. By asserting herself as a subject—rather than an object within the masculine narrative—she generates a meaning that Senanayak is incapable of interpreting. When she confronts him with "her two mangled breasts," Senanayak, for the first time, feels fear in the presence of an unarmed woman. Having already been brutalized and stripped of everything, there is nothing further the state can do to break her. She remains unwavering—calm, resolute, and defiant. Her stance recalls the speaker in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who, after devastating loss, proclaims: "All is not lost; the unconquerable will, / And study of revenge, immortal hate" (Book I, line 106). Dopdi's composure endures even in her ravaged state: "Her black body comes even closer, and Dopdi shakes with a burst of indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she



begins laughing” (402). By representing Dopdi’s violated body as a site of resistance rather than defeat, Mahasweta Devi affirms what Michel Foucault terms the “instrument effect”—a reversal in which the mechanisms meant to silence and subdue instead generate a powerful counter-narrative. Dopdi’s final act becomes an embodied protest, overturning the trauma inflicted by male authority and reclaiming agency through defiance.

The name *Draupadi* immediately recalls the episode in the *Mahabharata* in which the enemy chief attempts to disrobe her in a royal court, only for Lord Krishna’s divine intervention to ensure her endless protection. This moment of humiliation becomes the catalyst for the Kurukshetra war between the rival cousins. In Mahasweta Devi’s retelling, however, the tribal woman Dopdi—whose name echoes that of the epic heroine—rejects any dependence on male authority to defend her honour. Unlike her mythological counterpart, Devi’s *Draupadi* confronts her violators without invoking divine or patriarchal protection, asserting instead her own agency in the face of brutality.

Mahasweta Devi challenges conventional notions of “honor” in a woman’s life by transforming the female body into a site of resistance rather than an object of shame. Instead of seeking protection or sensationalizing her suffering, Dopdi uses her violated body to expose the hypocrisy embedded within patriarchal power structures. Despite enduring a night of brutal physical assault, she refuses to betray her male comrades, demonstrating remarkable emotional and psychological resilience. While the agents of male authority can scrutinize and even pity her wounded body, she remains internally unbroken. Her defiance in the face of circumstances that would crush most individuals underscores her extraordinary strength. Devi simultaneously critiques the culturally distorted understanding of “chastity” in Indian society—a concept that has long imprisoned women psychologically. The belief that a woman’s virtue resides in her untouched body leads many rape survivors to suffer profound and enduring mental trauma. By rejecting this oppressive construct, Dopdi subverts a centuries-old ideology that has kept women subservient.

In *The Ramayana*, Sita is compelled to undergo a trial by fire to prove her purity. In a society shaped by such narratives, Devi’s *Draupadi* suffers doubly—first as a victim of hierarchical class oppression, and again under the weight of patriarchy. Yet Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi refuses to internalize trauma in the conventional sense; instead, she strips herself bare in defiance, turning her violated body into a medium of protest and an unmediated lesson for her oppressors. When the sensational gaze is removed, the same naked female body that was dominated and violated at night becomes, by daylight, a force capable of destabilizing the male psyche. Dopdi weaponizes her wounded, scarred body to expose the false



constructs of patriarchal “honor.” Senanayak—once the embodiment of terror and authority for the tribal community—ultimately finds himself confronted and unsettled by a woman he sought to destroy. In this reversal, the oppressed becomes the source of trauma for the oppressor. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes in *In Other Worlds*, “I translated the Bengali short story into English as much for the sake of its villain Senanayak as for its title character Draupadi (or Dopdi)” (122), underscoring how crucial this inversion is to the narrative’s political force.

Although born into a life marked by hardship within a marginalized tribal community, Dopdi refuses to become a mere palimpsest erased by suffering. Instead, her traumatic past fuels her determination to confront and challenge those responsible for her condition. She emerges as a fierce combatant, fighting not only for her own dignity but also for the collective rights of her people. Unable to tolerate the injustices imposed upon her, Dopdi—an illiterate tribal woman—becomes a striking embodiment of freedom and justice. Her struggle is not an isolated one; she stands in solidarity with other tribal women, defending their right to live without oppression. Significantly, her deepest wounds do not originate from her own community but from the dominant upper-caste structures of mainstream Hindu society that seek to exploit and suppress her.

Within the indigenous community, women are not inherently devalued; Dopdi’s suffering arises not from her own culture but from the distortions imposed by dominant societal structures. Her trauma is not “natural” but socially manufactured—stemming from her identity as a woman belonging to a marginalized tribal group. For tribal communities, such forms of violence become an almost inescapable part of existence. Although often indirectly, Mahasweta Devi exposes the patriarchal social architecture that inflicts profound pain on women’s lives. Through Dopdi’s experiences, the narrative offers fragments of the brutal tragedies and relentless suffering endured by her community. Her defiant resistance emerges from the compulsion of lived horror, and she transcends fear itself. In this context, Spivak observes that Dopdi is “unique and, in a patriarchal and patronymic setting, even an ‘attacker’ in the strange, unpaired, and uncoupled meaning” (183). This marks a stark contrast between Dopdi of Mahasweta Devi’s short story and Draupadi of *The Mahabharata*: while both women endure comparable forms of trauma, Dopdi refuses submission, whereas the epic Draupadi relies on divine or patriarchal intervention.

Although Dopdi refuses to conform, her defiance inevitably draws her into even greater danger. Once arrested, she is subjected to sexual violence—reflecting the broader vulnerability of women in Indian society to male aggression. Yet even in the face of this brutality, Dopdi maintains a remarkable



composure. Her response to the trauma she endures after her arrest astonishes the reader, as she confronts her situation with unwavering resilience. Imprisoned and violated, she still refuses to disclose the information the officers demand. Frustrated by her silence, Senanayak instructs his men to –

do the needful. Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years Draupadi, strangely enough, see sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says “water” she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. (401)

Dopdi’s decision to stand nude before Senanayak becomes a powerful assertion of resilience in the face of injustice and humiliation. In this moment, the seemingly powerless woman destabilizes the authority figure who once terrorized her; her vulnerability becomes her strength. By confronting her oppressor with her naked body, Dopdi rejects the patriarchal notion that a woman’s honor is tied to her sexuality - an idea that figures like Sita in *The Ramayana* were compelled to uphold. Unlike the mythic heroine, Dopdi refuses to seek validation or protection from male authority. Her trauma does not silence her; instead, it fuels a radical and violent form of resistance against those who violated her. Having grown up amid systemic oppression and social injustices, she has learned to respond not with submission but with defiance. Fiercely independent and unyielding, Dopdi refuses to be confined by obedience and emerges as a woman capable of confronting and overcoming even the most brutal circumstances.

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