

THE THEME OF GENDERED SUBALTERN IN THE WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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Abstract

In the post colonial era, the field of gender has been of much debate and many seminal works have been based upon it. Different societies have treated women as the ‘other’, ‘colonized’, ‘deprived’ and; ‘the fairer sex’ has time and again suffered the politics of oppression and repression. Of late the concept of gendered subaltern has been of much consequence which implies that women have been doubly subalternized first on the basis of nationality; the other, on the basis of gender. With the growing popularity of new historicism we have seen abundance in the works ascribing history from below. Many influential texts have come up stating the women point of view divorced from the male vision. But it is only recently that ‘double colonization’ or the gendered subaltern has begun to be theorized and found voice. In my paper I will study Mahasweta Devi along with different women writers and how their work has been decisive in bringing about awareness on the issue of subalterns.

Introduction

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, to marginalize is an act “to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power”. History is a witness to women’s sufferings. Since long women have been treated as slaves and objectified. Women have performed the role of both M-other and the Other. No matter how the world changes, no matter which country and social system people live, no one can deny women’s marginalization in history. Though women are worshipped in the form of *Kali*, *Durga* and *Shakti* yet the orthodox patriarchal society through the means of force and restrictions like the sati system, child marriages, denial of education to women, put restraint on their movement at social, political and educational levels. In the twenty-first century we strongly talk about women empowerment and equality but much remains on the black and white. We are divorced from the actual world. We manipulate history and give soaring number of women’s emancipation but close our eyes on the sufferings they are facing. The picture is very different in rural, semi-urban, backward areas. History records history from above; class, but literature records history from below; the truth.

Many Feminists vociferously and strongly made their view point against male dominance and patriarchy. Among them was Simone De Beauvoir who in his, *The Second Sex*, philosophized about the females in society who are always referred to as the opposite sex. De Beauvoir calls the ‘other’ the minority, the least favored. She says, “We open factories, the offices, the facilities to women, but we continue to hold that marriage is for her the most honorable career freeing from the collective life.”

Gendered Subaltern as a Theme:

Subaltern is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, women and other groups denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power. Spivak, who translated Devi, uses this term, and goes on to elaborate the problems of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situation of gendered subjects and of Indian women in particular. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her path breaking essay ‘*Can the Subaltern Speak*’ concludes that the subaltern do not have a voice of their own and so they cannot speak but in her translation of Mahasweta Devi’s short story *Draupadi* she not only romanticizes the tribal women but gives the gendered subaltern a voice to speak. Devi in her works focuses on gendered subaltern and makes breast a symbol and Spivak states in the *Introduction* to the *Breast Stories*:

The breast is not a symbol in all her stories. In ‘Draupadi’, what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero)sexuality and gender violence begins to waver. In ‘Breast-Giver’, it is a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation. Devi’s mature fiction never romanticizes the socio-libidinal relationship between the sexes. . . ‘Breast-Giver’ builds itself on the cruel ironies of caste, class, patriarchy. Devi keeps Jashodha’s name unchanged from the Sanskrit scriptural form. Although the orthodox Hindu middle class nominally reveres the brahmin, the prerogatives of economic class are in fact much more real for it. The underclass ‘Hindu female’ (Breast-Giver), as long as she credits Hindu maternalism and family value, is unable to save herself. Even in her lonely death, she remains ‘Jashodha Devi’- literally, the Goddess Jashodha, honorary goddess by caste.

By juxtaposing the breast symbol with the historical names of the protagonists in her short stories she emphatically brings out the cruel sufferings of the gendered subaltern. In *Draupadi* a story of a tribal woman being tortured and raped by police officials she points out through careful selection of words the misery that the subaltern woman have to face by the (un)armed men.

“Draupadi Mejhen was apprehended at 6:53 p.m. It took an hour to get her to camp. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8:57 Senanayak’s dinner hour approached, and saying, ‘Make her. Do the needful,’ he disappeared.

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees 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 sense that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi has passed out. She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth!. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it. Then morning comes. Then Draupadi Mejhen is brought to the tent and thrown on the straw. Her piece of cloth is thrown over her body. Then, after breakfast, after reading the newspaper and sending the radio message 'Draupadi Mejhen apprehended,' etc., Draupadi Mejhen is ordered brought in. Suddenly there is trouble. Draupadi sits up as soon as she hears 'Move!' and asks, Where do you want me to go? To the Burra Sahib's tent. Where is the tent? Over there. Draupadi fixes her red eyes on the tent. Says, Come, I'll go. The guard pushes the water pot forward. 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. So he goes to ask his superior. The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind. What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stops before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?

*Where are her clothes?
 Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them.
 Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an
 indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her
 ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on
 her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp
 as her ululation, what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can
 you clothe me again? Are you a man?
 She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to
 spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be
 ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do?
 Come on, kounter me—come on, kounter me—?
 Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the
 first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly
 afraid.”*

These lines as quoted from the text represent the objectification of a woman. No matter what the circumstances are she is always seen as an object of desire, a thing to win over. She is raped in a single night by army men, how many times she losses track of. On a metaphysical level this story is a satire on *Mahabharat's* Draupadi. Firstly, in those times, too, a woman was seen nothing more than an object, a thing so personal so as to put her on stake. Grimly, nothing has changed off time. Secondly, where the Draupadi of Mahabharata was saved By Lord Krishna, there is no such Lord in contemporary India who could come and save Devi's *Dopdi*, she is raped incessantly and even while she is bleeding she continues to serve the hungry dogs of the army. While the next morning they try to cover up their own deeds by clothing her Dopdi refuses to put on clothes, this act by the army personnel show the hypocritical nature of men and society at large. They fantasize women, materialize her, objectify her but are hypocritical in society. It would be a mistake to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power- could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. (11)

In Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Breast-Giver*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she talks about the (M)other Jashoda who had taken motherhood as her profession.

*“Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb ,
 when she didn't feel faint in morning, when Kangali's body didn't drill her
 body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp. . . Motherhood
 was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless
 beings. “*

*“The second son impregnates his wife at the same frequency, but behind it
 lies deep love. The wife is often pregnant, that is an act of God. But the
 second son is also interested in that the wife remains beautiful at the same
 time. He thinks a lot about how to combine multiple pregnancies and
 beauty, but he cannot fathom it. But today, hearing from his wife about
 Jashoda's surplus milk, the second son said all of a sudden, 'Way found.'*

'Way to what?'

'Uh, the way to save you pain.'

'How? I'll be out of pain when you burn me. Can a year-breeder's health mend?'

'It will, it will, I've got a divine engine in my hands! You'll breed yearly and keep your body.'

The couple discussed. The husband entered his Mother's room in the morning and spoke in heavy whispers. At first the Mistress hemmed and hawed, but then she thought to herself and realized that the proposal was worth a million rupees. Daughters-in-law will be mothers. When they are mothers, they will suckle their children. Since they will be mothers as long as it's possible- progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maidservants, she won't have a voice to object. Going out because they can't get it at home-this is just. If Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. "

The wives were happy. They could keep their figures. They could wear blouses and bras of 'European cut'. Jashoda, the milk-mother, who had breast-fed fifty children of hers and her Masters': 'Knowing these breasts to be the rice winner, she had constantly conceived to keep them filled with milk. The breast's job is to hold milk.'

By the end of the story Jashoda contracts breast cancer and while she is suffering with utmost pain none of her sons is there by her side. No milk-son comes to take care of her. The mother had become the other for the children and for her own husband.

"Jashoda died at 11p.m.

The Haldar-house was called on the phone. The phone didn't ring. The Haldars disconnected their phone at night.

Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable."

Such was the fate of the God manifest Jashoda, who took up motherhood as a profession, a professional mother, having reared so many children was left alone to be cremated by the society's other.

Mahasweta Devi's predominant concerns are the tribal backwaters, the "exploitations of the *Adivasis* by the landed rich or the urban-administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labor and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke-out a meager livelihood, the plight of woman who are breadwinners and victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, ill-treated wives, and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price – are adequately represented". From the above situations, one can infer the insignificant role of Sujata in the *Mother of 1084*, as a woman who has been relegated to the position of a neglected, suppressed, ill-treated, mechanical and marginalized in all forms in the male dominated society who consider woman as an object of sex, only to reproduce, bring money when needed and does not possess even a voice to express her own concerns. The novel *Mother of 1084*, by Mahasweta Devi, translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay, shows how the Naxalite Movement brings two subaltern mothers closer in spite of class barrier. Sujata around whom the story revolves is shown as a helpless being fully aware but still unaware of her surroundings. Having many children but she still thinks that she is the closest to Brati, but is in a state of shock, surprise, bewilderment, astounded, distressed when she comes to know of how her son Brati dies. She

‘thinks’ she knows ‘everything’ but the death of her son brings clarity of thoughts and action to her. By the end of the novel she is no more submissive.

Sujata realized *‘that Somu’s mother, with her little learning, her limited intelligence and her inability to put her ideas into words, thought the same thoughts as she with all her learning, clarity of vision and competence in articulating ideas. The thoughts that troubled her were cried aloud by Somu’s mother’* (53-54). Sujata could not vent her emotions, being mother she was the other in her own household.

‘How could Somu’s mother understand Sujata?. . . if Sujata had told her that she lived in a shiftless, rootless, lifeless society where the naked body caused no embarrassment, but natural emotions did; if she had told her that mothers and sons, fathers and sons, husbands and wives never hit one another even when relationships stood irremediably poisoned, never wept aloud, showed their best manners to everyone, Somu’s mother would not have been able to make any sense of it at all. (67-68)’

These are feelings of *Hazaar Churasir Maa*, she was subservient to her own needs and unaware of her own second class position as a wife, as a mother and had spent her life living in illusion. It is only in Somu’s mother and Nandini both women and part of the lower classes that she finds solace in. She was all along living in a society where:

“It was all like a festering, malignant cancer. The dead pretended to live within relationships that were long dead and thus keep up a masquerade of life. Sujata felt that if she went close enough to Amit, Neepa and Balai, the stench of carrion would overwhelm her. They were contaminated and diseased from the very wound. The society that Brati and his comrades had tried to exterminate kept thousands starving in order to nourish and support these vermin. It was a society that gave the dead the rights to live, and denied it to the living. (115)

Conclusion

The state- that is centralized power- is always patriarchal in nature, so the weaker, marginal, down-trodden people are always as a rule kept weaker, marginalized and down-trodden. And these people are gradually excluded from the power scene and even their primary rights to live are negated. In this system the indigenous people of the country, the tribal, the lower castes, the women are kept necessarily outside the boundaries of power. Women by their sheer numbers can be called the largest minority to be thrown aside and oppressed. In the years after independence there has been no vital change in the situation.

For a long period of time the state, the language, the patriarchal elite culture posed as if she was not there- not as a human being. That is, women were always either attractive, sensuous, playthings or hussies or mothers. On the socio-political scene she was a showpiece to be held high or a flesh piece to be violated to bring disgrace to the clan, or group or a nation she belongs to. Thus, a woman was always politically and socially treated as an object and not as an individual.

For quite a long time, women, like the dalits or the lower castes, were barred from uttering the alphabet or touching books. But this bar had to be taken off with time. We find the first women prose writers, only one or two at first, from a hundred and fifty years back. Mahasweta Devi in her numerous prose work has dealt more directly with a woman’s place in

this patriarchal society and her relationship with the state. She has also recast and rewritten the stories of ideal womanhood associated with the iconic Seeta, Draupadi, Jashoda and others. The following lines of the poem “*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” remind me of a positive hope: Let us not clip the wings and tie the feet of the gendered subaltern but instead recognize “the other, the subaltern, downtrodden (M)other, above all a woman” as a free bird that:

“. . . leaps
on the back of the winds
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.”

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