
Performative Act of the Subaltern: A Postcolonial Figure of Subaltern Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to evaluate the resistance to the ethnic and gender subalternity portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in the story, Draupadi. Mahasweta Devi portrays a figure of resistance to the multilayered subalternity through the rejection of gender performative acts in both theatrical and non-theatrical contexts of subaltern. The story, Draupadi, challenges the conventional phallogocentric representation of gender subalterns and colonial domination over marginalized ethnicity through the construction of the character, Dopdi Mejhen (or Draupadi), a young Santal widow, fighting for the socioeconomic freedom of her tribe, who radically stands naked exposing her blood spotted body against the oppressive colonizer after extreme physical oppression, to protest the patriarchal and colonial domination over her body and ethnic community. She is subaltern by her class, caste and gender; but liberates herself from subalternity through non-cooperational resistance. This paper applies the theory of 'subalternity' of Ranajit Guha and Chakravorty Spivak to bring out the aspects of multilayered subalternity and intellectual location of the resistance; and the theory of 'gender performativity' of Judith Butler to evaluate the resistance of gender subalternity. This research proves that the conquering resistance to colonial domination and subalternity is the result of the non-cooperative movement against dominant elitism, rejection of gender performative acts, radical stand against ethnic representation, existential tactics to disrupt the essential codes and dominant administrative colonial power.*

Keywords: *Subaltern, Performative act, Theatrical, Non-theatrical, Elitism, Resistance, Marginalization, Ideological state apparatus, Representation, Identity, Administrative arm, Ethnicity etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“What’s the use of cloth now? There’s no man I should be ashamed. You strip me and how can you clothe me again? Are you men? Come on. Strip me. Kounter me” (Devi:36).

Draupadi is a story of a subaltern subject, an Indian tribal widowed woman who fights alone for the socioeconomic freedom of her clan and liberates herself from gender subalternity.



Mahasweta Devi illustrates how ideological & repressive state apparatus and gender norms colonize in the women's body as the primary targets of patriarchy, legitimized by colonial rule. Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen is the victim of multiple layers subalternity determined by dominant elitism and social representation. Ranajit Guha's 'elitism' and Gayatri Spivak's 'representation' tend to identify subalterns and the application of their concept of subalternity in Draupadi will bring out multi-layered subalternity of her. This paper deals with the problem of traditional definition of subaltern and the source of resistance. It brings out the core way of the resistance to one's subalternity through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Literature Review

According to Bhaskor Chandra Dutta in *Questioning Subalternity: Re-Reading Mahasweta Devi'S 'Draupadi'*, Dopdi was not victimized and Draupadi is a subversion of male power and male narrative construction of women. She is subaltern by "class, caste and gender" (Dutta 2019). He saw the text as a literary and political emancipation of women. He states "story demolishes the traditional idea of the subaltern, and the writer reinvents a new incarnation in the heroine of the story" where the subaltern speaks boldly (Dutta, 2019).

According to Aakashka, Draupadi' is a powerful story that portrays a strange paradox of being defiant and reclaiming agency even when fear is gnawing at you. "The story re-imagines Mahabharata's Draupadi in a modern, political, and tribal context. Devi shines light on the language, songs, beliefs, and ideas of the tribal populace who are ostracized from the mainstream political imagination" (Aakashka 2020). What this does is lead to wrong notions about religion and traditions being monolithic. The striking story, 'Draupadi' shatters all our mainstream political illusions.

According to Somnath Sarkar, in *Draupadi as a symbol of Subaltern Defiance*, Mahasweta Devi portrayed an actual image of humiliation of lower caste, those who are known as 'untouchables', were suppressed by the game of politics and brutally oppressed by the national bourgeoisies. Devi exposes the irony of the patriarchal hegemonic societies and wanted to break the shackles of patriarchy through her writing.

The review of the literature brings out Mahasweta Devi's redefinition of subalternity, socio-political context of a tribal subaltern, the aspects of Dopdi's subalternity. But in what socio-political aspects she is victim, what is the change or outcome after her radical stand, what is the approach of resistance are remained question.

2. METHODOLOGY

It is a Qualitative research based on close textual analysis method. The primary source is the text *Draupadi* written by Mahasweta Devi. Secondary sources include different scholarly journals, internet archives, blogs, and articles etc. This research is done based on Gayatri Zahirin 5 Chakravorti Spivak's and Ranajit Guha's theory of Subalternity, as tools. This research is explanatory in nature.

3. Research Objectives

a. General Objective:

To explore subaltern's performative act and the approach of the resistance to the gender subalternity.



4.2 Specific Objectives:

- I. To identify the subalternity and performative acts of Draupadi
- II. To explore the approach of the resistance to gender subalternity.

4. Theoretical framework

‘Subaltern’ is a term used to signify any social group or human of lower rank or subordinated group at any aspect of the society such as class, caste, religion, nationality, gender etc. The word, subaltern, first used by Antonio Gramsci to signify the peasants. Later, ‘Subaltern Studies’ was introduced and developed by Indian philosopher Ranajit Guha along with some other scholars who brought multi-dimensions in subaltern studies and Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak is one of them. According to Guha, Subaltern is one or one group who/which is dominated by the elite. This domination of the elite can be by any aspect of class, caste, gender, religion, and nationality, where one can possess multiple subalternity in different aspects and even the same person can be elite in other aspects. That means, to point out the subaltern in the power hierarchy, there should be pointed an elite. On the other hand, Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak gave a grand narrative definition of Subaltern, that, a subaltern is made through representation and construction of identity and truth. In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, she gave the example that how the West or British colonizer made Indians subaltern by specific representation and construction of truth and identity. She challenges Foucault and Deleuze claiming that a subaltern cannot speak until she/he get out of his/her constructed identity and representation. At any smaller or broader social context, one’s subalternity depends on how one is represented or one’s identity is constructed in the society. A person, a natural being or a group can be represented or signified in innumerable ways by ascribing any fixed identity and truth, or by representing them through any essential means.

If a subaltern does not get him/herself out of his/her performative act, the subaltern must move in the society conveying the constructed subaltern identity. In this ground, Judith Butler, a post structural-feminist philosopher, gave a deconstructive theory of ‘performative act’ in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988). For Butler, a person’s identity is not so linear to represent him/her; rather his/her performative acts define identity. For Butler, (1) one is subjective decision maker to convey the constructed identity through one’s performative act and (2) and even a person’s performative act is divided into two contexts: theatrical and nontheatrical. It means that a person’s subalternity can even be divided in two separate contexts since the two contexts live separately in the same person.

According to Judith Butler, in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, gender identity is performative accomplishment, an act which one has to perform according to a script that is historically written by the ancestors (Butler: 520). The gendered norms exist in society through the performative acts in theatrical contexts and nontheatrical context. The theatrical performative act occurs in such a context when one is in front of society and the acts are validated by the society. The society performs as the audience and gives value to the performance of the performer’s theatrical act. The nontheatrical act is an act without consideration of the eyes of the society or any audience. For example, it occurs when a person does not need to act thinking of any audience like while staying in personal room, or, when in the street, rushing on the bus for hurry office, or when one needs emergency blood for family member. In such cases someone does not consider whether the audience watching at or not, rather he/she acts according to his self and such context is defined as non-theatrical context. The norms of theatrical contexts influence one to accept and maintain certain performative



codes in nontheatrical context too. The person starts to maintain the performative act in non-theatrical context when he/she embodies the gender norm as ‘a style of being’ (Sartre) or ‘a stylistics of existence’ (Foucault)” (Butler 521). In non- theatrical context one does not perform in front of the eye of the society; rather, one works and exists for one’s own essence. In both contexts, whether one will follow the performative codes or not, is completely personal performative. The acceptance of performative act in both contexts depends on the embodiment. Through embodying the social codes, one exists as a social being with certain rank and codes of identity. That means, to exist in the society or as a validated social being, a human has to embody the social performative codes and perform according to the codes, whether he/she is elite or subaltern. Through rejecting performative acts, one can get out of socially constructed identity and thus so subalternity which is reflected in Spivak’s translation of Draupadi.

Subaltern studies analyze the ‘binary relationship’ of the subaltern and ruling groups, and studies the relationship of dominance and subordination in colonial systems which are applied in any aspects like class, caste, gender, religion, administration etc. focusing on public history and memory, Guha terms “elitism,” the dominant, where in opposite, the subaltern is the marginalized subject within the networks of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, dogmatism and nationalism. According to Ranajit Guha, subaltern studies questions on “historical schools of thought that could not represent the history of nationalism in India without celebrating the role of the elites” (Guha 403). When elites define the codes, the subalterns are silent because the history is the history of elitist biasness (Guha 403). In the question of “who is elite?”, Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), brings out the definition of elite given by Ranajit Guha that the elite is either “the dominant foreign groups or the dominant indigenous groups of India or the dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels” (Spivak: 26). That means that the elite will be either the foreign colonizer or national level colonizer or the local level colonizer. In Draupadi the administrative arm of Senanayak is the local level elite.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), gave a grand narrative definition of subaltern that subaltern exists through representation. A group is made and kept as subaltern by representing and ascribing any certain essential identity for the benefit of another elite group. She claims that the west represents India as barbaric, uncivilized and third world by constructing identity and truth. Spivak questioned Foucault and Deleuze, who claimed from Marxist view that the subaltern, if given chance or space, can speak. Challenging Foucault and Deleuze, she states that the subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern is a colonial construction by representation, ascribed identity & truth and epistemic violence. In colonial India, women are double colonized. For Spivak, truth is constructed and thus so identity like,

British colonizers represented Indians Barbaric after abolishing the ritual of Sati. The way Indians are made subalterns through representation and construction of truth & identity, in the same way, anybody’s or any social group’s identity can be constructed and be made subaltern. Spivak does not mean that the subaltern is always necessarily made by foreign colonizers. Rather, for Spivak, a subaltern is a group that is represented with a constructed identity of lower rank, class, or caste by the elite. Under the domination of elite, the common people are subalterns. The application of Judith Butler’s theory of ‘performative act’ and Ranajit Guha and G.C.Spivak’s theory of ‘subalternity’ in these two texts will bring out the aspects of subalternity, impact of subalternity in nontheatrical context and the voice of subalterns in the Indian cultural context.



5. DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

5.1 Elitism and representation

Dopdi Mejhen is subaltern in terms of class, caste and gender according to Guha's and Spivak's definition of subalternity. From Guha's perspective, there must be an elite. Here Senanayak is the elite who dominates the administration, capital power, religious thoughts and constructs identity of the subaltern. Spivak aligns with Foucault that truth is a construction of the ruling power, and it thrives one's representation by making an identity in the society. That's why Spivak rejects Foucault's Marxist approach that when one is represented with a subaltern identity, one cannot speak, like Draupadi. She is a Santal woman, having no political & economical voice in her society and marginalized from social politics. As a tribal and a rebel, she is double outcasted. Her representation in her society made her three times colonized by administrative colonizer, patriarchy and tribal caste. She is subaltern in a society where both ideological and repressive state apparatus is active to oppress her. In the Naxalite movement she and her husband need to escape and stay out of her own clan being the target object of search of the administrative arm. The rebellious leader who fights for socioeconomic freedom for her community, is not even safe in her own clan. She is out casted even by her own community. It reflects the active form of Ideological state apparatus that successfully hegemonized the spiritual consent of the tribal people. Along with the administrative arm, the Panchayat proclaimed Dopdi as criminal with the demonstration of high reward who will assist to arrest Dopdi. In this society her representation is governed by the elites and the commons are accepting since their psychology is hegemonized and are mimic to the colonizer. According to Bhaba, mimicry gives the success of colonialism. In such a spiritually colonized society, Dopdi has no stand and voice and thus she has to stay in jungle crawling days and night. In this ground, Devi exposes the disability of a subaltern. Lennard J Davis writes in her book, *Enforcing Normalcy Disability, Deafness and the Body* (1995) that disability is a relative term which depends on economic stand, cultural representation, capitalism and abled gaze. She is subaltern by her ability, since she is disabled to walk free and kept crawling by many days in jungle to save her life. And at the end, she got arrested which proves her disability to win over the searching arm force. The practice of elitism and representation thrive in the process of keeping one group silent, escaped and crawling. Therefore, from Guha's and Spivak's perspective, Dopdi was, by default, conveying multiple subalternity of ethnicity, class, ability and gender, before her ultimate radical stand in front of the colonizer.

5.2 Performative Act: Theatrical & Nontheatrical Context.

According to Butler, gender is an act that is dramatic, a performance, that is rehearsed, according to a certain script that is written by the ancestors, and it is a historical reproduction. The body is the center of the performance, while, for Merleau-Ponty, Wittig and Foucault, the body is a historical idea (Butler 520). Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, claims that the body is not a natural species; rather it's a historical idea, which Beauvoir claimed on gender in *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir too, the body is a "process of embodying cultural and historical possibilities" (Butler 521). Draupadi does not embody the historical and cultural possibilities of body. The body is a cultural sign and being a woman, one has to conform the cultural polarization of gender and the essential codes of society, because the body becomes gender when one's "series of acts are renewed, revised and consolidated"



(Butler 523). Draupadi by leaving social conformity, does not maintain her gender in her theatrical context since her body does not embody the cultural and historical possibilities prescribed to her.

Another context is the nontheatrical context of one, which always found to be influenced by the embodiment of social possibilities. The hegemonized society act according to what codes are applied to them, when their consent is spiritually colonized. Because of active ideological state apparatus, people are dominated with their consent when they become habituated in staying safe as subaltern. Then they act accordingly, and their nontheatrical performative act gets subalternized. In this ground Draupadi is subjective to reject the embodiment in her nontheatrical performative acts. Theatrically Draupadi is criminal, punished, tortured and raped. But in her nontheatrical context, she is not victim, rather possesses a total uninfluenced and unvictimized spirit that is reflected when she stood again with an abused naked body to face her oppressor after her multiple rape. Bhaskar Chandra Dutta claimed in *Questioning Subalternity: Re-Reading Mahasweta Devi'S 'Draupadi'* that Draupadi is not victimized. Such comment is not enough to define Draupadi's sense of self-identity and resistance in both contexts. Dutta's stand aligns with her nontheatrical context, but not with the theatrical context. Theatrically she is victimized and ruined but the oppression could not touch her nontheatrical context because, by the influence of theatrical oppression, she does not fall in identity or existential crisis of her gender when she already rejected the contemporary gender norms. She stood with "indolent laughter. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing" and asks "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (Devi). It shows clearly that her nontheatrical spirit starts to dominate her theatrical acts when she stands as a nonessential existential being since she claims

"There is not a man here I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me." (Devi). She proves that they can dominate her by their oppressive force but can not dominate her spirit because she does not align with essential gender norms under patriarchy and stands naked as an existential being. Therefore, Draupadi is victim and oppressed in theatrical context, but not in nontheatrical context which means that she is not a remained gender subaltern after her stand.

5.3 Resistance to the Subalternity of Draupadi

Draupadi comes out of her gender subalternity by rejecting her performative act in nontheatrical context. The combination of performative act in both contexts defines one's gender identity. If one is subaltern in both contexts, one will be identified as a gender subaltern, silent in both contexts. If one is subaltern in any one context, either theatrical or nontheatrical, one is not a gender subaltern but can be subaltern in other multiple aspects such as class, caste, age, religion etc. For example, a person can be theatrically elite in class but non-theatrically he can possess some other aspects of subalternity like religion or age. In such cases, the person is elite in one context, subaltern in another context. In Butler's sense, to define one as gender subaltern, one must be identified subaltern in both theatrical and nontheatrical contexts because gender identity depends on both contexts. Draupadi's rejection of nontheatrical conformity brings herself out of gender subalternity and her nontheatrical act starts to dominate the theatrical context. When she says "there's no man I should be ashamed of. What more can you do? Come on. Kounter me", she already rejected the theatrical audience, and converted her acts into nontheatrical acts. And when someone does not care of the audience, nothing can defeat him/her and to stop him/her becomes a risk for the opponent. The same environment is



created by Draupadi. In front of Senanayak, she is bearing her nontheatrical performative act, because it's an act without consideration of audience or of what the audience will think of her. Rejecting all essential codes, she resists as an existential being. She "pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terrible afraid". Now why does Senanayak, the chief, get afraid to an unarmed target? When one cannot be silenced through physical oppression, and rather, stands naked showing the wounds, one becomes a big threat to the colonial domination, because the person does not consider anybody to show the dark evidence of harsh oppression and the dominant elite cannot keep the damage concealed. Such non-co-operational stand can shake and threaten any colonial authority. Mahasweta Devi sketches the total spectrum of resisting colonial rule by an unarmed existence.

Draupadi uproots her gender subalternity but cannot get out of the subalternity of class and caste. By her stand she changed her gender subaltern identity, but her class and caste remained the same. Devi, portrays that a tribal Indian woman conveys multiple layers of subalternity, and she has to resist and save her existence by rejecting the socially prescribed performative acts in all layers of subalternity. Draupadi rejects both dominant elitism and representation, and thus she gets out of her subalternity since for Guha 'elitism' and for Spivak 'representation and construction of identity' make produce subaltern.

6. CONCLUSION

In India, women are dipped under multiple layers of subalternity in terms of class, caste & gender and being victim of isolation, economical subjugation, sexual harassment, social arrogance, racial & ethnic discrimination. Maximum subalterns accept their subalternity being silent with their conformity to the social performative acts. It becomes social arrogance when all of a society accept it in their nontheatrical context. Mahasweta Devi portrays Draupadi an iconic figure to show how one can save herself out of subalternity and resist elitism & representation by rejecting the performative acts. Draupadi's unarmed, non-co-operational existential stand shakes the dominant colonial stability of the administrative arm through her rejection of performative act. Therefore, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is an exemplary iconography of resistance to the gender subalternity in Indian culture.

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