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Gendered Subalternity and Sociocultural Resistance: Tribal Women's Defiance in Mahasweta Devi's Giribala and Draupadi

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Abstract

This paper explores how Mahasweta Devi's short stories Giribala and Draupadi portray the struggles and resistance of tribal women against gendered subalternity. Devi's narratives highlight the intersections of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity, presenting her female protagonists as both victims of oppression and agents of resistance. In Giribala, a young girl's journey from exploitation to defiance challenges the commodification of women in patriarchal rural societies. In Draupadi, Dopdi Mejhen transforms her violated body into a site of rebellion against state and patriarchal violence. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, this paper examines how Devi uses silence, refusal, and symbolic confrontation to give voice to the subaltern. It also questions whether the subaltern woman can truly speak within literary discourse or if her resistance lies in disrupting the oppressive gaze. By analyzing these stories, the paper shows how Devi redefines power dynamics and transforms silence into a powerful form of resistance.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, subaltern studies, tribal women, gendered resistance, body politics, postcolonial feminism, Giribala, Draupadi, silence as resistance, voice and agency.

INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi, a prominent Indian writer and activist, dedicated her work to amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, particularly tribal women. Her short stories Giribala and Draupadi expose the systemic oppression faced by women at the intersections of gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. These narratives challenge dominant power structures by showcasing the resilience and defiance of subaltern women. Giribala tells the story of a low-caste woman who breaks free from marital exploitation, while Draupadi portrays a tribal Naxalite rebel who resists state-sanctioned violence through her body. Both stories engage with postcolonial feminism and subaltern studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988). This paper analyzes how Devi's protagonists resist sociocultural and systemic oppression, using their bodies and silence as tools of defiance. It explores how these women navigate their marginalized identities and challenge patriarchal and colonial structures.

Gendered Subalternity in Tribal and Rural Contexts

Gendered subalternity refers to the compounded marginalization of women due to their gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. In Giribala and Draupadi, Devi portrays tribal and low-caste women who face extreme oppression within patriarchal and state systems. According to Spivak, the subaltern woman is

"doubly effaced" by her gender and socioeconomic status, making her voice nearly inaudible in dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988). Devi's characters embody this concept but also challenge it through acts of resistance.

In Giribala, the protagonist is a young girl married off to Aulchand, who treats her and their daughters as commodities. Giri's low-caste status and gender make her vulnerable to exploitation, as her husband sells their daughters, Bela and Pori, into prostitution under the guise of marriage. This reflects the systemic devaluation of women in rural India, where daughters are often seen as economic burdens (Devi, 1997). Giri's suffering highlights how tribal and low-caste women are trapped by patriarchal norms that prioritize male authority and economic gain.

Similarly, in Draupadi, Dopdi Mejhen, a Santal tribal woman, faces oppression as a Naxalite rebel fighting against landlords and the state. Her identity as a tribal woman places her at the margins of society, and her capture by the police leads to brutal torture and gang-rape. Devi uses Dopdi's story to critique the intersection of state violence, patriarchy, and caste oppression during the Naxalite movement (1967–1971) in West Bengal (Devi, 1988). Both Giri and Dopdi represent the gendered subaltern, whose bodies become sites of exploitation but also platforms for resistance.

Modes of Sociocultural Resistance

Devi's protagonists resist oppression in distinct yet complementary ways, using silence, refusal, and symbolic confrontation to challenge dominant power structures. In Giribala, Giri's resistance evolves gradually. Initially, she endures Aulchand's betrayal as he sells their daughters, reflecting her internalized powerlessness within a patriarchal society. However, her final act of leaving Aulchand with her remaining children marks a powerful rejection of her role as a passive victim. This act of walking away, though silent, is a radical assertion of agency, as it defies societal expectations that women remain submissive to their husbands (Devi, 1997). Giri's resistance lies in her refusal to let her youngest daughter suffer the same fate, breaking the cycle of commodification.

In Draupadi, Dopdi's resistance is more confrontational. After enduring torture and rape, she refuses to cover her naked, bloodied body and stands defiantly before Senanayak, the officer who sanctioned her abuse. Her statement, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" challenges the patriarchal and colonial gaze (Devi, 1988, p. 196). By rejecting shame and using her violated body as a weapon, Dopdi transforms her subjugation into a symbol of defiance. This act aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where Dopdi rejects the "performative acts" of gendered submission expected of her (Butler, 1990). Her nakedness becomes a performative act of resistance, destabilizing the power of her oppressors (Dutta, 2019).

Both characters use their bodies as sites of resistance, but their methods differ. Giri's quiet departure reflects a personal rebellion against familial patriarchy, while Dopdi's bold confrontation challenges state and patriarchal authority on a larger scale. These acts illustrate how tribal women, despite their marginalization, find ways to resist within their specific contexts.

Challenging Dominant Power Structures

Devi challenges dominant power structures by giving voice and agency to her subaltern characters. In Giribala, she exposes the commodification of women in rural India, where bride-price and child marriage perpetuate gender and caste oppression. Giri's decision to leave Aulchand subverts the patriarchal norm that women must endure suffering for the sake of family honor. Devi critiques this system by showing how Giri's defiance, though condemned by society, prioritizes her children's safety

over societal expectations (Devi, 1997). Her silent rebellion speaks to the resilience of subaltern women who resist without access to institutional power.

In Draupadi, Devi reimagines the mythological Draupadi from The Mahabharata, who is saved by divine intervention during her public disrobing. In contrast, Dopdi receives no such salvation, highlighting the absence of divine or institutional support for subaltern women (Choudhary, 2016). By placing Dopdi in the context of the Naxalite movement, Devi critiques the state's role in perpetuating violence against tribal communities. Dopdi's refusal to be shamed by her nakedness inverts the power dynamic, making Senanayak the "unarmed target" (Spivak, 1988, p. 196). This act challenges the phallocentric authority of the state and patriarchy, positioning Dopdi as a "terrifying superobject" who reclaims her agency (Spivak, 1988).

Devi's use of polyphony—multiple voices and perspectives—further amplifies the subaltern's resistance. In Draupadi, the narrative shifts between Dopdi's perspective and that of her oppressors, exposing the fragility of hegemonic power (Sinha, 2019). Similarly, Giribala contrasts Giri's suffering with Aulchand's callousness, highlighting the gendered power imbalance. By centering the subaltern woman's voice, Devi disrupts the mainstream literary canon, which often silences marginalized perspectives (Bhongle, as cited in Guha, 2024).

Can the Subaltern Woman Speak?

Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is central to understanding Devi's portrayal of tribal women. Spivak argues that the subaltern woman is often silenced by both colonial and patriarchal discourses, making her agency difficult to articulate (Spivak, 1988). In Giribala and Draupadi, Devi grapples with this question by showing how her characters resist through non-verbal and unconventional means. Giri's silence as she leaves Aulchand is not a sign of defeat but a deliberate rejection of patriarchal norms. Her act of walking away speaks louder than words, asserting her agency in a society that denies her a voice.

In Draupadi, Dopdi's resistance is more vocal and performative. Her refusal to cover herself and her taunting of Senanayak ("There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed") directly challenge the patriarchal gaze (Devi, 1988, p. 196). However, Spivak cautions that the subaltern's voice is often mediated through translation or representation, raising questions about whether Dopdi's resistance is fully her own or shaped by Devi's narrative (Spivak, 1988). Despite this, Dopdi's act of standing naked disrupts the power structures that seek to silence her, suggesting that her resistance lies in unsettling the oppressor's gaze rather than conforming to traditional notions of speech.

The tribal woman's body plays a crucial role in articulating dissent. In both stories, the body is a site of violence—Giri's daughters are sold, and Dopdi is raped—but it also becomes a tool of resistance. Dopdi's nakedness and Giri's departure transform their bodies from objects of exploitation into symbols of agency. This aligns with postcolonial feminist theories that view the body as a contested space where power is both imposed and resisted (Mohanty, 2003). Devi's narratives suggest that while the subaltern woman may not "speak" in the conventional sense, her resistance through silence and bodily defiance is a powerful form of agency.

Intersectionality and Tribal Identity

The resistance of Giri and Dopdi cannot be fully understood without considering their tribal identities, which amplify their marginalization. Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights

how overlapping identities—such as gender, caste, and ethnicity—create unique experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). In Giribala, Giri's low-caste and tribal background exacerbates her vulnerability, as her family's poverty and social status limit her options. The commodification of her daughters reflects a broader systemic issue where tribal women are dehumanized, their bodies treated as economic assets. Giri's act of leaving Aulchand is thus not only a personal rebellion but also a rejection of the caste and economic structures that perpetuate her oppression. Devi uses Giri's story to critique the intersectional violence faced by tribal women, emphasizing their resilience in reclaiming agency despite societal constraints (Devi, 1997).

In Draupadi, Dopdi's tribal identity as a Santal woman positions her as a target of both state and patriarchal violence. The Naxalite movement, rooted in resistance against feudal and capitalist exploitation, provides the backdrop for Dopdi's activism, but her gender and ethnicity make her uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence. Devi highlights how tribal women's bodies are weaponized by the state to suppress rebellion, yet Dopdi's refusal to be shamed transforms her body into a site of political resistance. Her defiance challenges the colonial legacy of viewing tribal communities as "savage" and subhuman, reasserting their humanity and agency (Choudhary, 2016). By weaving intersectionality into her narratives, Devi underscores the compounded struggles of tribal women and their ability to resist multiple forms of oppression simultaneously.

Silence as a Form of Agency

Silence in Devi's stories is not passive but a strategic form of agency that subverts dominant power structures. In Giribala, Giri's silence throughout her suffering reflects the societal expectation that women endure exploitation quietly. However, her final act of leaving Aulchand without verbal confrontation transforms this silence into a powerful statement. This aligns with postcolonial feminist scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who argue that subaltern women often resist through "muted" or non-verbal strategies due to their exclusion from dominant discourses (Mohanty, 2003). Giri's silent departure disrupts the patriarchal narrative that confines her to victimhood, allowing her to assert control over her future and protect her children.

In Draupadi, silence operates differently but equally powerfully. Before her final confrontation, Dopdi remains silent during her torture, refusing to give her captors the satisfaction of her submission. Her eventual vocal and physical defiance—standing naked and taunting Senanayak—builds on this silence, turning it into a prelude to her rebellion. This strategic use of silence aligns with Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of "speaking nearby," where marginalized women resist by creating alternative modes of expression that challenge hegemonic power (Trinh, 1989). Devi's portrayal of silence as agency in both stories underscores how tribal women, denied traditional platforms of speech, use their bodies and actions to articulate dissent, reshaping the narrative of subalternity.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's Giribala and Draupadi offer profound insights into the gendered subalternity of tribal women and their modes of sociocultural resistance. Through Giri's silent rebellion and Dopdi's bold confrontation, Devi challenges the systemic oppression of patriarchal and state structures. By centering the voices and bodies of subaltern women, she disrupts dominant discourses and redefines power dynamics. While Spivak's question about the subaltern's ability to speak remains complex, Devi's narratives suggest that resistance can take forms beyond verbal expression—through silence, refusal, and

the subversive use of the body. These stories not only expose the brutal realities of gender and caste oppression but also celebrate the resilience of tribal women who reclaim agency in the face of marginalization.

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