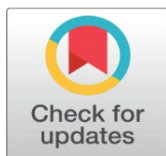
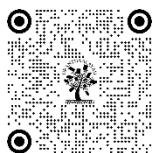


MAHASWETA DEVI AS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL: GLIMPSES OF RESISTANCE IN DRAUPADI

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ABSTRACT

Though India rejoices in the spell of chimerical prosperity, it is still mangled by the shackles of outmoded perceptions, oppression and attitudes of power. Over some time discrimination based on gender has been causing harrowing experiences to the women population weakening the social fabric. This high sense of insecurity, identity crisis and fragmentation felt within one's own society paves the way for the bold intervention of academic and writer intellectuals bestowed with the special capability of strengthening and emancipating the lacerated section of the society. Many eminent writers of India came to the forefront as public intellectuals to articulate the traumatic experiences encountered by Indian women as the main subject in their narratives. Mahasweta Devi is one such writer who delineated the ceaseless exploitation and oppression faced by women and dared to make scathing comments about the unjust authority imposed on women making their lives deplorable. Through her writings, she explicitly manifested her growing concern for the oppressed and the exploited, rather victimised group. This paper attempts to examine the distinct traits that make Devi a renowned public intellectual and the imaginative ideas and ideologies manifested in her narratives that ignites the desperate urge among the victimised folk to look for ultimate solace. The paper further explores the gamut of unjust practices against subaltern women and the intriguing strategies of resistance in her celebrated short story *Draupadi*.

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Keywords: Public Intellectual, Patriarchy, Subaltern, Resistance



1. INTRODUCTION

India, as it stands at the pinnacle of technological explosion, takes a back seat in blurring the boundaries between man and woman and the ceaseless efforts in effacing the differences based on gender have been a dismal failure. A deep reflection on the current state of affairs brings on every face a grimace of pain. India has always been under the sinister hold of the formidable barriers of discrimination petrifying the multitude. Unfortunately, discrepancies based on gender as perpetrated by the uncanny male chauvinistic powers have been causing havoc in the lives of women curtailing their basic rights and freedom. Currently the number of women assaulted, molested and murdered is increasing at an alarming rate which insinuates the grotesque realities permeating the society. The general predicament of women belonging to the marginalised section, dalit community, tribal folks and the lower strata of society is still grim and pathetic. Our society has fallen from grace and lost all sense of decency as it accommodates many disgruntled women bemoaning their fate of life. It remains ironic that though women are conceived as goddesses as per religious faiths, they are brutally and

menacingly molested and ripped off by malevolent powers. The unequal distribution of power in the social system emerged from the patriarchal rule resulting in timeless subordination of women to men. Patriarchy was conceived by the Indian society as a powerful means to dominate women, to possess women's bodies through sexuality and as a befitting property susceptible to male violence in the form of rape and molestation. An inferior position is accorded to women in the system and they are prone to exploitation, degradation, violence and discrimination which go beyond endurance in both their homes and outside world. One of the famous sociologists Sylvia Wallby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." Patriarchy encouraged the creation of credulous, un-sceptical, unquestioning creatures bound to be docile and naïve under the dominant clutches of men. The atrocities against women and the offensive deeds meted on them can be regarded as palpable influences of patriarchy.

Thus India, still crippled and caught in the mire of all kinds of discrimination and biases, requires the ardent and dedicated service of intellectuals who can critically evaluate the situation and resolve the crisis rationally. Researchers, academicians and writers spread all over the nation have always displayed their keenness to take a gruelling step to dispel the gloom lurking among the women folk but have found to their dismay that there has been a paucity of credible alternatives to bring respite to women. It is in this context that the role of intellectuals in our societies is of immense significance. In a scene where intentional patriarchal strategies were adopted against women, the role of intellectuals increases by leaps and bounds. The crucial issue of gender justice hitherto ignored and less ruminated upon becomes the genuine concern and moral responsibility of these intellectuals. According to Miliband, 'Intellectuals are those who are mainly concerned with the formation, articulation and dissemination of ideas' (O'Connor, 2014, P55). As Edward Said puts it, the intellectuals should be 'the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege' (Etzioni, 2006, P52). Intellectuals who display an undaunted spirit to question and rail against the existing regime, social pattern and ideology are now categorised as public intellectuals. The term 'Public Intellectual' is a modern coinage. There are several characteristics that serve as main attributes to qualify a person as a public intellectual. Public intellectuals are mostly concerned with public issues in general and never show any reluctance in speaking aloud their thoughts and views on grave subjects. Such people never faltered in their determination to rescue a debilitating crowd struggling in a faulty system. As Richard A Posner says, a public intellectual is one who "expresses himself in a way that is accessible to the public, and the focus of his expression is on matters of general public concern of (or inflected by) a political or ideological cast" (Etzioni, 2006, p2) is very relevant as general public look forward to knowledgeable people who can interact with them on a public platform with great ease and concern on the most haunting and acute issue enervating the public. It becomes imperative for the intellectuals to engage and preoccupy themselves with the pressing problems of the public and then deploy their social intelligence to bring about a social change. Public intellectuals are bestowed with the special capability of demystifying the accepted views of a society and 'construct new forms of discourse through which effective opposition and critical expression can be achieved'. (Ransome, 1992, p.196).

Sartre has rightly suggested about the role of intellectuals that 'If the intellectual wishes to understand the society in which he lives, he has only one course open to him and that is to adopt the point of view of its most underprivileged members'. (Connor, 2014, p57). Irving Howe had further remarked that intellectuals were 'a proudly independent critical group submitting all doctrines and values to critical inspection, asserting the legitimacy of the free mind' (Howe, 2006, p74). Adding to this he also said "the intellectual life-free wheeling, wide-ranging, speculative- could be regarded as a "permanent revolution" in consciousness, a ceaseless dynamic of change." (Howe, 2006, p.74). In a system where gender difference was accepted as normal, the responsibility of women intellectuals has increased by leaps and bounds. It is this ultimate realisation that women's issues required a distinct space in the society for further reflections and ruminations which paved the way for assigning intellectual role to women. This desperate urge to bring about a radical change in the persisting conditions of women gathered momentum with the selfless and magnanimous intervention made by women intellectuals. Many eminent women writers of India voiced their genuine concerns about the insidious practices prevalent in the system and articulated the traumatic experiences encountered by Indian women as the main subject in their narratives. In lieu of the exemplary capacity of creativity, rewarding sanctity and wisdom are accrued to them by the public which in effect made the writers accede to the symbolic role of intellectuals. Mahasweta Devi was one among such writer intellectuals who displayed unstinting kindness and support to the discriminated victims of the society. She attempted unabashedly to articulate the hitherto neglected urges and desires of the victimised women particularly the marginalised groups. She was always motivated by altruism and a genuine faith in human dignity which led her to stand for the rights of the vulnerable section of the society. She tread the similar path of intellectuals by adopting the adversarial characteristics of intellectuals like questioning the authority, voicing the underprivileged, reprimanding the

policy decisions or raising dissenting voices against the powerful. She underscores through her narratives the unceasing burden carried by women in a patriarchal framework by their stifling existence within familial and social constraints. She resolutely adopted the role of Public intellectuals who brazenly treaded the untrodden paths to provide psychological succour and social support to the grieving multitude enabling them to endure the tragic situations and also overcome the invincible forces weakening them. She showed no reluctance to take a leading role to decipher the debilitating effects of bureaucratic powers on the most deprived sections of the society, assisting them to reshape and rebuild their lives.

Devi's charismatic personality could exert a potent and benign influence on women folk and even kindle the enthusiastic and undaunted spirit among the watching public to initiate umpteen movements safeguarding the rights of women. The discriminatory gendered pattern, the ways in which tradition and paradigm were established, the blatant violation of laws by the powerful minority and power manipulations by political clout formed the numerous perturbing factors which ignited the zealous spirit of Devi to work for the aggrieved multitude. It is an indisputable fact that Devi undertook many risks and challenges in her horrendous journey as a saviour to the grieving women population raising her dissent against the existing patterns of gender. She became so blended with the social fabric keeping herself firmly footed on the ground that she could easily perceive and analyse the despicable situation encountered by the marginalised folk. She was deeply concerned and considerate about the women folk who were wading through the quagmire of despair and depicted their woes and sufferings in the most factual way in her literary works. She is one of the most radical writers of fiction who could create a paradigmatic shift in the existing paradigms of change implemented at the administrative level. Both her writings and activism focussed upon the conditions of tribal, aboriginal, dalit and other marginalised sections in Indian contemporaneity. As it is natural among the public intellectuals to go by their ideals openly and invoked in her 'a tradition of courage and independence' to serve as a saviour to the innocent victims of patriarchy.

Resistance in Devi's writings is often an abrupt reaction to oppression and a counter move against the hegemonic perception held in the society. 'Draupadi' is one such narrative that unfolds the story of a defiant militant protagonist Draupadi, who challenges her oppressors unarmed. The story is set among the tribals in Bengal and the Dopdi Mehjen, the protagonist is gripped with the sole objective to procure the rights of tribals. Devi presents the life of a tribal woman Dopdi, a subaltern endowed with both traditional and revolutionary roles. The ineffable quality of resilience in Draupadi triggers an unfathomable shift in gendered perception. Draupadi charms the readers with her retaliating power and unflinching determination to fight the repressive system. The story is founded on binary opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the rich and the poor, the innocent and the shrewd opportunist. The protagonist is a product of her own impatience and rage who bravely fights till the end displaying her undeterred courage putting herself in dangerous plight. Gayatri Spivak gives voice to such oppressed subalterns and gendered subalterns in the lines "For if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." This articulates the trauma encountered by the women of the deprived population. 'Draupadi' begins with an outbreak of tribal insurgencies owing to the detection of inequities within the State. It is the desperate need for survival which promulgates defiance and arrogance among the underprivileged.

Dopdi and Dulna, the couple represent the indigenous community who indulge in backbreaking service of upper class feudal lords with no reward but petty wages. The story reveals the callousness of the feudal lords who denied the poor tribals their basic rights to utilise the natural resource water even when their domicile, Birbhum, is drought stricken. The turbulence in the region culminates in the murder of Surjon Sahay, the rich landowner and moneylender. This incident instigates the state officials to unleash a brutal assault and wreak havoc on tribal protesters mistaken for rebels. This ultimately leads to tribal unrest and they are forced to flee in exile unfed, half-clad and barefooted. In the army operation, many tribals are slaughtered ruthlessly, bemusing Dopdi and Dulna. The miserable plight of fellow tribesmen accentuates their rage and hence they remain resolute in their confrontation with the State policies. After Dulna is hunted down and killed by the army officers, they go on a frantic rush to capture his wife Dopdi. The text unveils the varied guises in which tribal women are exploited.

Devi through the story 'Draupadi' mounts a biting sarcasm against the protectors of law and order who revel in their sanctioned privilege to violate the fundamental rights assured to every citizen. The story unfolds the reasons for the subaltern protest against state violence or social order. Devi expresses her deep dissent for the state officials who grab the freedom of another human being breeding rancour and hatred among the deprived. The weird desire of the State forces to weaken the spirit of tribal males by capturing Dopdi and laying claim on her body is mocked at by Devi. India, despite being a democratic, secular republic calls attention to the issues of exclusion, exploitation and erasure of

subaltern women that are constantly practised within the State. After Dopdi is captured, she gets ferociously assaulted by the cops. The moment Senanayak, the army officer, gives orders to his fellow officers to “Make her do the needful” (p.34), they pounce on her giving her the severest punishment. Her rights as a woman are abused by the protectors of law contrary to the right that every citizen is liable to in a democratic setup. Dopdi’s rape elaborates on the multifarious ways in which women are subjected to violence, humiliation and ghastly tortures. Such gruesome and harrowing experiences of women are translated by women into counter-offensive acts against the oppressive and hegemonic social structures. It occurs to women that violence can be overthrown only by counter violence.

Dopdi Mejhen is subjected to the abhorrent act of rape enabling her to transform the accepted image of women as erotic objects to an object of revenge and resistance. Dopdi is avenging the deep bruises caused to her body by faltering the socially constructed image of woman as a feeble, meek and sexual commodity and emerging as a powerful woman fit to resist the male assaults. Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak opines on the resistance shown by the subaltern as: “When the subaltern ‘speaks’, in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible... resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual.” (Devi 1993: xxvi) Dopdi resists the bodily violence perpetrated on her by the group of officers. The incident unfolds the various ways in which women devise multifarious forms of resistance against the oppressive legacy of patriarchal notions of woman as a commodity. Unlike the normal women wailing over the trauma awaiting help, Dopdi plunges into inexplicable animosity and is gripped by a strange courage to oppose the oppressive forces. She investigates her battered body by lowering “her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she’s made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn” and strengthens herself and ‘pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth.’ (p.35). Dopdi’s refusal to robe herself by the cloth thrown at her by the officials reflects on her amazing daringness. She adamantly insists on remaining publicly naked, astonishing the public and deconstructing womanhood, voices against atrocities wreaked on women and subverts the notions of the sacred. Dopdi’s refusal to cover her nakedness reveals immense female power where an innocent subaltern woman is forced to speak.

Dopdi’s resistance is detailed by Devi as: “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?” (p.36). Thus she becomes an epitome of strength, symbolising the striking survival of physically abused women. Dopdi’s reaction to rape is a bolt from the blue for male chauvinists who regard women as merely an erotic object and a commodity to be used at his own will. There wasn’t a mark of disgrace on Dopdi’s face instead the oppressors felt embarrassed when she in the end “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... What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me- ?” (p.36)

The story surprisingly shows how Dopdi reverses the fear and disgrace to her own exploiters which is evinced in the concluding sentence, “Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.” (p.37). She emerges as an indomitable warrior questioning the typical silence adopted by many women in our society. Dopdi jeers at the apparent toughness of Senanayak who is rendered speechless by the retaliating words hurled on him by an illiterate, defiant tribal girl. Devi through the work ‘Draupadi’ exposes the sham of social hierarchy and the multiple guises adopted by the male power to protect the honour of women. ‘Draupadi’ thus turns out to be a metaphorical resistance asserted through a subaltern girl’s experiences. The novel engenders among the ordinary women a revolutionary zeal to resist their oppressors. Thus Devi succeeds in redefining the role of women in adverse situations.

Mahasweta Devi exposes the brutal and avaricious nature of the upper ruling class and their malicious discrimination against the lower castes. The power of the ‘masters’ to manipulate and negotiate with the bureaucrats including the police force in order to curb the growing unrest among the lower class becomes explicit in the text. The absolute penury faced by the villagers, the strategic ways in which the poor are exploited, the massive burden imposed by religion in the name of rituals, the deceitful nature of privileged classes together evinces the victimization of subalterns. The economic vulnerability and insecurity are exposed as the two major reasons which lead such women succumb to the sexual harassment of the privileged classes. Devi explicates through the story how women take cue from the faulty exploitative system and finally emerges as manipulators of the same system by negotiating the social milieu in their favour. She tried to promulgate the disparate ways through which the underdog fought injustice and how resolutely they bore the difficulties which ensued from the underhand machinations incurred on them by the inhuman vicious classes. “For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what

a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others.” (Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 1996). Throughout her life, Devi had been a true intellectual in all its senses as she laboured hard demanding for the reclamation of the rights of the disempowered and urged the selfish humanity to be a more humane society transcending class, caste, religion, gender, etc. Her writings accentuate the earthy tensions and the elemental life of the neglected ones who are trampled upon by the ruling monarchs.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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