

Postcolonial reading
of mahasveta devi's
'draupadi' or 'dopdi'
as translated by g...



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Frantz Fanon, in his book 'The Wretched of the Earth', states, "Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation" (Fanon 2). For him, colonialism not only exploits, but also creates categories like the 'colonized' who can be dehumanized and disempowered. Classical Marxist theory talks about the economy determining a 'superstructure' and that fundamental divisions of race, gender and culture are caused by economic inequalities. For Fanon, these divisions no longer apply in the colonial context. A new context arises- race, a division that the colonist makes between the colonizer and the colonized. This unequal division is black and white. And while that may largely hold true, as colonizers prevail across continents and expand their reign, all the other aspects of caste, class and gender conveniently factor in as well. Thus the colonized party eventually suffers oppression from all fronts. If one happens to be a black, low caste, poor woman- each of these characteristics almost derive from and give rise to the other. The colonized subject is almost then as treated lesser than dirt.

Mahasveta Devi- an educated Indian Bengali writer and socio-political activist has given much voice in her work to the struggles of the tribal peasant in West Bengal and Bihar. 'Draupadi' or 'Dopdi' as in the original Bengali text, is one such powerful perspective of a black Santal tribal woman- the 'other' in a postcolonial nation state rife with internal Naxalbari politics. Postcolonial scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated this work to English making it accessible to much of the world speaking the colonizer's language. In her Foreword to the text there emerges an emphasis on the theme of the

gendered ' subaltern'[1] whose voice is stifled and yet rises against its oppressors. Spivak however, sees this ' study of postcolonial literature' itself as an act of double colonization in her mindset of the ' doublethink' that is shared by all of the First World scholars " in search of the Third World" - including the character of Senanayak; an officer caught between identifying with the ' enemy' in ' theory' but going against them in ' practice'. A claim she elaborates upon in her essay, ' Can the Subaltern Speak?' is something she further alludes to Mahasveta Devi as well; her narration of Dopdi's tale, still remains a removed perspective of a middle class Bengali leftist intellectual in her fifties.

In giving her the name ' Draupadi' Mahasveta Devi establishes a relationship between her protagonist and the central heroine of the great Indian epic - Mahabharata. Both defiled and humiliated, both strongly persevering and raising a voice against their perpetrators. Given the name by her oppressor's wife, her upper class mistress, in a moment of benevolence is adapted by her in a tribalized form: Dopdi. The killing of her mistress's husband begins the story as Dopdi's name appears on the list of wanted names. While Draupadi in Mahabharata is described as ' exceptional and singular' her marriage is also the only instance of polyandry known in our epics- a ' legitimized pluralization in singularity' (Spivak 387). When she is defiled and humiliated by men in the public court room, it isn't any of her husbands but her Lord Almighty friend, Krishna who protects her dignity by clothing her when she prays for help. In contrast, Dopdi is in a comradesly, activist, monogamous marriage and she loves her husband very much. An independent and strong leader of her tribe, she is no less than any man.

The episode ends however, with her subjection to gang rape by multiple men. She does throw her hands up in the air and cry beforehand, but as a mark of defiance. No Lord Almighty comes to help this dark-skinned, poor tribal woman and she is the only one who stands up for herself and makes her voice heard. When in the end, the First World upper class officer Senanayak asks why she is naked; she tears them and refuses to wear them. Going closer to him, she says, “ What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” She spits blood on his white shirt and says she won’t allow him to clothe her, daring him to counter her. (402) Spivak emphasizes on the usage of this word ‘ counter’ which, as mentioned by Mahasveta Devi ‘ is an abbreviation for “ killed by the police in an encounter.”’ (391) Dopdi does not understand English, but understands this word and its formula. It is her colonizer’s language that she uses to imply actions against the colonized- a word for warning and death as her husband was killed in a ‘ counter’.

In the end however, she uses this very word against her colonizer and there is a sense that she now owns it. She uses a language that she doesn’t know ‘ properly’ as she challenges her oppressor. As Mahasveta Devi concludes, “ Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.” There is a sense of satisfaction that even the reader obtains over this show of rebellion- a gruesome and bizarre victory of sorts; when the oppressed and colonized takes over their colonizer, adapts their ways and uses it in winning their own battle against them. Language serves as a key marker in separating the colonized and colonizer. Overcoming this barrier and taking

control, even if it is through giving meaning to one small word is a liberating victory.

Mahasveta Devi, in her Bengali text, further uses a lot of italicized words in English, which are presented in English in the Bengali text. While writers in today's post-colonial era often use words in the Indian language 'chutnifying' the text and adding cultural diversity, Mahasveta Devi rather chooses to Anglicize her local Bengali text. Perhaps it is to show initial dominance and significance of the colonial rule and subsequent breakthrough against it and conquest over the language itself; even as, in all irony, a middle class intellectual activist writes in a regional dialect that is relatively of a higher, 'elite', and literary status to narrate a story of a dusky, lowly, tribal Santal woman proud of her lineage, who uses a 'crass, peasant dialect' and for whom the 'black blood' of her people is the most pure and unadulterated.

Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Kwela Books, 2017. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can The Subaltern Speak?*. Macmillan, 1988. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "" Draupadi" By Mahasveta Devi". *Critical Inquiry*, 1981, pp. 381-402 [1] Subaltern, meaning of 'inferior rank' is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci referring to those groups in society which are outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colonial power ruling the homeland.