



The Politics of Sexual and Female Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

Surbhi^{1,*}, Dr. Nidhi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

E-mail: surbhischrawat312@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract— The research paper is a humble effort to examine the politics of sexual violence and female resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (1978). The work occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian literature for its powerful portrayal of gender, power, and resistance. Set against the socio-political background of the Naxalite movement, it depicts the harsh realities faced by tribal communities and exposes the violence inflicted upon marginalized women by state institutions. Through the character of Dopdi Mejhen, Mahasweta Devi challenges the conventional representation of women as silent victims and instead portrays a protagonist who confronts oppression with remarkable courage and determination. Dopdi's refusal to cover her violated body after custodial rape marks a decisive moment of resistance that unsettles patriarchal notions of shame, honour, and female modesty. Rather than accepting the identity imposed upon her by her oppressors, she reclaims her agency through an act of fearless defiance that transforms her body into a powerful symbol of protest. The study draws upon feminist and postcolonial perspectives to analyse the relationship between bodily violence and political power while highlighting the significance of resistance in the struggle for dignity and justice. The paper further argues that Mahasweta Devi presents sexual violence as a reflection of broader systems of social and political oppression operating within patriarchal and hierarchical structures. By foregrounding the experiences of a tribal woman, the narrative questions dominant ideas of justice, authority, and gendered violence. *Draupadi* ultimately demonstrates that resistance can emerge even under the most oppressive circumstances, making the text an enduring contribution to feminist literature and postcolonial discourse. The study concludes that Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Dopdi Mejhen continues to offer valuable insights into contemporary debates on gender, violence, human rights, and the politics of the female body. Through this study, the researcher has attempted to establish that *Draupadi* is not merely a narrative of victimization but a powerful discourse on female agency, resistance, and the politics of the violated body. The researcher further emphasizes that Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Dopdi Mejhen redefines resistance by transforming bodily oppression into a site of political empowerment.



Keywords— Sexual Violence, Female Resistance, Body Politics, Feminism, Postcolonial Literature.

One of the most influential voices in Indian English literature, Mahasweta Devi, is well-known for her writings that challenge the structures of caste, patriarchy, and state power by giving voice to those who are often excluded from mainstream historical and political narratives. Unlike many

writers who portray marginalized people as passive sufferers, Mahasweta Devi presents them as active participants in their own struggle for dignity and justice. Her literary works are deeply rooted in social reality and reflect

her lifelong engagement with the political conditions of tribal communities in India.

Originally published in Bengali as *Dopdi* in 1978 and later translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Draupadi* is one of Mahasweta Devi's most celebrated short stories. The story is set during the Naxalite movement and centres on Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal woman who is arrested by state security forces because of her association with revolutionary politics. The title *Draupadi* itself is deeply symbolic. Mahasweta Devi deliberately invokes the memory of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, who was publicly humiliated in the royal court but ultimately protected through divine intervention. Dopdi Mejhen, however, receives no such protection. She belongs to a poor tribal community that has been excluded from political power, legal protection, and social recognition. By placing a tribal woman in the position of the epic heroine, Mahasweta Devi questions whether justice is equally available to all women in modern India. The contrast between myth and contemporary reality highlights the continuing vulnerability of women belonging to marginalized communities. Through Dopdi's experiences, Mahasweta Devi exposes how political authority uses violence against women's bodies to maintain social and institutional control. The story demonstrates that sexual violence is not merely an act of personal cruelty but a calculated strategy of domination directed at both women and the communities they represent. From the beginning of the narrative, Dopdi is identified not simply as an individual but as a political threat. Her capture is intended to break the morale of the resistance movement. The violence inflicted upon her body reflects the state's attempt to establish absolute authority through fear and humiliation. Mahasweta Devi therefore shifts the discussion of rape from the private sphere to the political sphere, showing that violence against women often functions as an extension of institutional power.

The idea of feminism as a struggle against systemic oppression finds a powerful expression in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. As bell hooks states, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." (Hooks 96)

This perspective helps in understanding Dopdi's resistance not merely as a personal act of defiance but as a political challenge to patriarchal and state-sponsored violence. The custodial rape inflicted upon Dopdi represents the intersection of gender, class, and tribal marginalization, while her refusal to clothe herself transforms her violated body into a site of resistance. Mahasweta Devi thus exposes the structures that normalize violence against marginalized

women and redefines female agency through fearless resistance against oppressive power.

The brutality reaches its peak when Dopdi is subjected to custodial rape. In order to "make her. Do the needful" (Devi 31) reveals how the female body is treated as an object over which authority can exercise complete control. The violence is systematic rather than accidental, exposing the relationship between patriarchy and state violence. Mahasweta Devi does not describe the assault merely to evoke sympathy; instead, she reveals how women's bodies become battlegrounds where political conflicts are fought.

Susan Brownmiller's assertion that "All rape is an exercise in power" (Brownmiller 156) emphasizes that rape is fundamentally an act of domination rather than sexual desire. In *Draupadi*, this idea is reflected through the custodial rape of Dopdi Mejhen, where sexual violence becomes a deliberate instrument of state power to humiliate, silence, and control a marginalized tribal woman. The custodial rape of Dopdi therefore functions as a strategy of intimidation. The authorities believe that by violating her body they will destroy her spirit and weaken the resistance movement. Mahasweta Devi suggests that patriarchal power frequently targets women because the female body is wrongly considered the carrier of family honour and community identity. By attacking Dopdi, the state attempts to humiliate not only one woman but also the entire tribal community she represents. The story thus reveals that violence against women is often closely connected with larger systems of political control and social domination.

The most powerful moment in the story occurs after the assault. When Dopdi is ordered to appear before Senanayak, she refuses to cover herself. The narrator states, "Draupadi stands before him, naked." (Devi 33). This brief sentence transforms the meaning of the female body. In patriarchal societies, nakedness is often associated with shame and vulnerability. The significance of Dopdi's resistance lies not only in her refusal to submit but also in her rejection of the social meanings attached to the female body. Throughout history, patriarchal societies have associated a woman's honour with her physical purity and modesty. Mahasweta Devi challenges this deeply rooted belief by presenting a protagonist who refuses to define herself according to patriarchal standards. After the brutal assault, Dopdi does not attempt to conceal her wounds or restore the appearance of normalcy. Instead, she openly confronts the reality of violence. Her refusal to wear clothes is not an act of helplessness but a conscious political decision that exposes the brutality of the state. The body that was intended to become a symbol of defeat is transformed into a visible reminder of institutional violence. In this way, Mahasweta Devi shifts the meaning of the female body from an object

of oppression to an instrument of political resistance. Mahasweta Devi reverses this cultural assumption by presenting nakedness as an act of conscious political resistance. Dopdi refuses to participate in the system that seeks to define her through humiliation. Her fearless declaration, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of," (Devi 33).

Directly challenges patriarchal notions of honour. Instead of internalising the shame imposed upon her, Dopdi shifts the moral burden onto the perpetrators of violence. Her statement rejects the traditional belief that a woman's dignity depends upon the preservation of bodily purity. Mahasweta Devi thereby questions social attitudes that stigmatize survivors of sexual violence while protecting the structures responsible for that violence. At a deeper level, Dopdi's resistance can also be understood as a rejection of fear. The state expects violence to produce obedience, silence, and submission. Instead, violence produces courage and defiance. Although Dopdi's body bears the marks of torture, her spirit remains unconquered. She refuses to beg for mercy or acknowledge the authority of those who violated her. This transformation illustrates one of the central ideas of the story: physical domination cannot guarantee psychological or moral control. Mahasweta Devi suggests that genuine resistance begins when fear loses its power over the oppressed. By confronting her oppressors without hesitation, Dopdi reclaims ownership of her body and identity, demonstrating that political authority has limits and that human dignity cannot be destroyed through violence alone.

Dopdi's resistance also challenges conventional representations of women in literature. Traditional narratives often portray women as passive victims who depend upon male protection or rescue. Mahasweta Devi deliberately rejects this pattern by creating a protagonist who becomes her own source of strength. There is no heroic saviour who rescues Dopdi from oppression. Her courage emerges from her own political consciousness and her determination to preserve her self-respect. Through this portrayal, Mahasweta Devi redefines heroism itself. Heroism is no longer measured by physical power or military success but by the ability to defend one's dignity in the face of overwhelming violence. Dopdi's resistance therefore becomes a powerful symbol of feminist struggle, demonstrating that even the most marginalized woman possesses the capacity to challenge oppressive structures through courage and unwavering self-belief. Dopdi's resistance reaches its highest point when she confronts Senanayak and asks, "What more can you do?" (Devi 33) This question is both political and philosophical. It exposes the limitations of violence as an instrument of power.

Although the state succeeds in violating her body, it fails to conquer her will. Her courage destroys the illusion that political authority can achieve complete control through physical force. Another significant aspect of *Draupadi* is the way Mahasweta Devi exposes the close relationship between political authority and patriarchy. The violence committed against Dopdi is not an accidental consequence of war or conflict; it is a deliberate strategy adopted by the state to demonstrate its absolute power. The officials believe that once a woman's body has been violated, she will lose her confidence, dignity, and the courage to resist. This belief reflects a patriarchal mindset that equates a woman's identity with her physical body. Mahasweta Devi strongly challenges this assumption by showing that although Dopdi's body has been wounded, her determination remains intact. Her resistance proves that political power can dominate the body but cannot completely control the human spirit.

Feminist thinking teaches us all, especially, how to love justice and freedom in ways that foster and affirm life. The story also highlights the silence that often surrounds sexual violence. In many societies, women who survive sexual assault are expected to remain silent because they fear social rejection, humiliation, or blame. Mahasweta Devi refuses to accept this silence as inevitable. Dopdi does not lower her head or hide herself from others. Instead, she openly confronts the men who attempted to destroy her identity. Her refusal to remain silent becomes a powerful form of resistance against both patriarchal society and state authority. Through this portrayal, Mahasweta Devi encourages readers to question social traditions that force women to carry the burden of shame while protecting those responsible for violence. Catharine A. MacKinnon's observation that "Women are socially disadvantaged in controlling sexual access to their bodies" (MacKinnon 123) highlights the structural inequalities embedded within patriarchal societies. In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi powerfully illustrates this reality through Dopdi Meihen, whose body becomes a site of state violence, exposing how patriarchal power deprives marginalized women of bodily autonomy and uses sexual violence as a means of domination.

An important feature of the narrative is the transformation of suffering into strength. Throughout the story, Dopdi experiences physical pain, emotional trauma, and psychological humiliation. However, these experiences do not weaken her political commitment. Instead, they strengthen her determination to challenge injustice. Mahasweta Devi suggests that resistance is not born in comfortable circumstances; it emerges from lived experiences of oppression. Dopdi's courage develops

precisely because she refuses to allow violence to define her existence. Her body becomes evidence of the state's brutality, but her fearless attitude becomes evidence of her moral victory.

Mahasweta Devi also questions the traditional concept of power. At the beginning of the story, power appears to belong entirely to the state. The military possesses weapons, legal authority, surveillance, and the ability to arrest and punish anyone suspected of rebellion. Dopdi, on the other hand, appears powerless because she possesses none of these resources. Yet as the narrative progresses, this understanding of power gradually changes. The state succeeds in controlling her physical body but fails to control her consciousness. Her refusal to obey demonstrates that genuine authority cannot be sustained through violence alone. The story therefore distinguishes between physical power and moral power. While the state possesses physical force, Dopdi possesses moral courage, and it is ultimately this courage that gives her the greater strength.

Another important theme in *Draupadi* is the question of identity. Dopdi is not represented only as a woman; she is also a Santhal tribal, a revolutionary, and a member of a marginalized community. These identities shape the violence she experiences and the resistance she offers. Mahasweta Devi suggests that the oppression faced by tribal women cannot be understood only through the lens of gender. Their experiences are also shaped by poverty, caste-like discrimination, political exclusion, and economic exploitation. Dopdi's struggle therefore represents the collective struggle of countless tribal women whose lives remain invisible within mainstream political and literary narratives. Through her character, Mahasweta Devi gives voice to those who have long remained unheard.

The symbolism of the female body occupies a central place throughout the narrative. Traditionally, patriarchal culture treats the female body as an object to be protected, controlled, and regulated by men. Mahasweta Devi rejects this ideology by presenting the body as an active source of political expression. Dopdi's refusal to cover herself transforms her body into a language of resistance that cannot be silenced. Without delivering long speeches or carrying weapons, she communicates her protest through her fearless presence. Her body itself becomes a testimony against institutional violence, exposing the moral failure of the state more effectively than any political slogan.

The story also compels readers to reconsider the meaning of justice. The legal institutions that are expected to protect citizens become instruments of oppression. Those entrusted with maintaining law and order are themselves responsible for violence and exploitation. Mahasweta Devi therefore presents justice not as something guaranteed by political

institutions but as something that must be reclaimed through resistance. Dopdi's defiance becomes an act of moral justice because it exposes the truth that official institutions attempt to conceal. Her courage forces the oppressors to confront the consequences of their own actions.

Furthermore, Mahasweta Devi's narrative style strengthens the political impact of the story. She avoids sentimental language and emotional exaggeration. Instead, she presents violence with simplicity and restraint, allowing the events themselves to reveal their horror. This restrained style makes the story even more disturbing because it reflects the ordinary, routine nature of institutional violence. The absence of melodrama encourages readers to focus not only on Dopdi's suffering but also on the political system that produces such violence. In this way, *Draupadi* becomes not only a literary text but also a powerful social and political document that continues to challenge readers across generations.

The final encounter between Dopdi and Senanayak marks not only the climax of the story but also the complete collapse of patriarchal and state authority. Throughout the narrative, Senanayak believes that violence is the most effective means of controlling political resistance. He assumes that by violating Dopdi's body, he will also destroy her confidence and identity. However, the events of the final scene expose the failure of this assumption. Instead of appearing frightened or broken, Dopdi confronts him with extraordinary courage. Her challenge, "Come on, counter me," (Devi 33) is not merely directed at Senanayak as an individual but at the entire system of oppression that he represents. At this moment, the balance of power shifts dramatically. The officer who once appeared powerful is unable to respond, while the woman who was expected to remain silent becomes the moral centre of the narrative.

Mahasweta Devi deliberately constructs this reversal to question traditional ideas about power and authority. Political institutions often depend upon fear to maintain control over ordinary people. In *Draupadi*, however, fear gradually loses its power because Dopdi refuses to be intimidated. Her body has suffered violence, yet her determination remains unbroken. The narrator's observation that Senanayak hesitates before her suggests that institutional authority is ultimately powerless when confronted with fearless resistance. Mahasweta Devi therefore argues that genuine power does not arise from weapons, legal authority, or military force. Instead, it emerges from the courage to defend one's dignity even under the most violent circumstances. The ending also carries a broader political significance. Dopdi's resistance is not presented as an individual act alone; it symbolizes the struggle of countless marginalized women whose voices

have been ignored by dominant political and historical narratives. As a Santhal tribal woman, she represents communities that have long experienced displacement, poverty, exploitation, and state violence. Her refusal to surrender therefore becomes a collective act of resistance against structures of oppression. Mahasweta Devi suggests that although governments may suppress movements through violence, they cannot erase the desire for justice and freedom that continues to exist among oppressed people.

From a feminist perspective, the conclusion of *Draupadi* is revolutionary because it challenges the traditional representation of women as passive victims. Dopdi is neither rescued by a heroic figure nor protected by legal institutions. She creates her own form of resistance through her courage and unwavering sense of self-respect. Her body, once treated as an object of domination, becomes the strongest expression of political protest. This transformation explains why *Draupadi* remains one of the foundational texts of Indian feminist literature. It demonstrates that resistance is not always expressed through violence or military strength; sometimes it begins with the refusal to accept imposed shame and silence.

CONCLUSION

Draupadi is not merely a story of suffering but a profound political and feminist statement on power, violence, and resistance. Mahasweta Devi successfully exposes how sexual violence is used as an instrument of political domination while simultaneously demonstrating that the female body can become a powerful site of resistance. Through Dopdi Meihen's unwavering defiance, the story challenges patriarchal values, questions the legitimacy of state violence, and redefines the meaning of female agency. It remains an enduring literary work that continues to inspire feminist scholarship, postcolonial criticism, and debates on justice, identity, and the transformative power of resistance. The continuing relevance of *Draupadi* lies in its uncompromising portrayal of institutional violence and its powerful affirmation of human resilience. Even today, when violence against women and the misuse of state power remain pressing concerns in many parts of the world, the story continues to encourage readers to question systems of injustice and to recognize the importance of resistance. Mahasweta Devi does not offer an idealized or comforting ending; instead, she presents a realistic yet deeply empowering vision of resistance in which dignity survives even under the most brutal circumstances. Dopdi's courage reminds readers that oppression can wound the body but cannot necessarily conquer the human spirit.

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