

Gendered Oppression and Rebellion in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi

Assistant Professor Ms. G. Abinaya, Assistant Professor Dr. H. Kalaivani
Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies,
Chennai

Abstract. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is a powerful critique of gendered oppression, caste-based marginalization, and state-sponsored violence, centering on Dopdi Mejhen, an Adivasi woman and Naxalite revolutionary. Subjected to brutal sexual violence by the Indian paramilitary forces, Dopdi subverts expectations of victimhood by refusing to be shamed, using her violated body as a weapon of defiance. Unlike Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, who is saved by divine intervention, Dopdi receives no savior—she reclaims her agency through radical resistance. This study applies postcolonial feminist theory and Frantz Fanon's framework on colonial violence, arguing that rape, often intended to silence women, instead fuels Dopdi's transformation into a figure of political defiance. By confronting her captors in her nakedness rather than covering herself in shame, Dopdi exposes the limitations of patriarchal control, proving that sexual violence cannot erase identity when met with unyielding resistance. This paper highlights how Mahasweta Devi dismantles traditional narratives of victimhood, demonstrating that true resistance does not always lie in escape, but in refusing to submit to systems of power that seek to erase female agency. *Draupadi* remains a landmark feminist text, challenging the ways in which caste, gender, and state power intersect to perpetuate violence while simultaneously revealing the revolutionary potential of female defiance.

Index Terms- Postcolonial Feminism, Gendered Oppression, State-Sanctioned Violence, Adivasi Resistance, *Draupadi* Myth Subversion, Sexual Violence as Power, Radical Female Defiance, Mahasweta Devi's Activism

I. Introduction: Mahasweta Devi and the Politics of Resistance

Mahasweta Devi stands as one of the most powerful literary and political voices in postcolonial Indian literature, using her writing as a weapon to expose the systemic oppression of marginalized communities. Throughout her career, she focused on the socio-political struggles of Adivasis, Dalits, and landless labourers, particularly emphasizing the gendered violence that these communities experience at the hands of the state and upper-caste hierarchies. Her short story *Draupadi*, originally written in Bengali and later translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, remains one of the most politically charged and disturbing narratives of state-sponsored sexual violence in modern Indian literature. Through a harrowing account of gendered and caste-based oppression, Mahasweta Devi constructs a radical critique of patriarchy, state power, and the dehumanization of tribal women in postcolonial India.

Set in the context of the Naxalite insurgency of the 1970s, Draupadi follows the story of Dopdi Mejhen, an Adivasi woman and Naxalite revolutionary, who is captured by the paramilitary forces, brutally tortured, and subjected to gang rape as a form of state-sanctioned suppression. Unlike conventional narratives that depict sexual violence as an ultimate tool of humiliation and erasure, Mahasweta Devi subverts the expected response of victimhood—Dopdi does not weep, beg, or break down. Instead, she turns her violated body into a site of resistance, refusing to cover herself and forcing her captors to confront her in her defiant nakedness. Her final act of radical defiance, where she stands naked and unashamed before the officer responsible for her rape, challenges the very structure of patriarchal violence, proving that rape does not destroy her spirit, but instead fuels her resistance.

This study argues that Dopdi's resistance dismantles traditional narratives of victimhood, offering a subversive reimagination of the Draupadi myth from the Mahabharata. In the epic version, Draupadi is humiliated by the Kauravas when they attempt to disrobe her, but she is ultimately saved by divine intervention as Krishna ensures that her sari remains endless. Mahasweta Devi, however, strips Dopdi of any divine saviour or external rescue, forcing her to confront her fate with only her own agency as a weapon. By choosing not to clothe herself, Dopdi reclaims control over her body, turning her nakedness from a symbol of shame into an act of defiance that challenges the masculinity and power of her oppressors.

This paper examines Draupadi through the lens of postcolonial feminism and Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic theory of colonial violence, which posits that oppression does not merely destroy the colonized subject, but also has the potential to transform them into a revolutionary force. Fanon argues that violence is a fundamental tool of the colonial regime, designed to dehumanize the oppressed and render them docile, but that it can also give birth to an awakened, militant consciousness that refuses submission. Dopdi's transformation from a fugitive to an unyielding figure of resistance mirrors this Fanonian trajectory, proving that even in the face of extreme violence, the oppressed can subvert their victimization into a political act.

Furthermore, this study will analyse:

- The role of state-sponsored sexual violence as a weapon of war, demonstrating how rape is used not just to punish individuals, but to send a larger message of control over an entire community.
- The intersectionality of caste, gender, and political identity, exploring how Dopdi's Adivasi identity subjects her to a unique form of erasure that upper-caste women may not experience in the same way.
- The radical power of Dopdi's final act of rebellion, proving that Mahasweta Devi dismantles the patriarchal notion that a raped woman is a broken woman.
- By placing Dopdi within the framework of revolutionary resistance, this paper highlights how Draupadi is not merely a story of brutalization, but of a radical and subversive redefinition of power dynamics between the oppressed and the oppressors. Through Mahasweta Devi's narrative, Draupadi becomes more than just a victim—she becomes an unbroken force of rebellion against a system that seeks to silence her.

II. The Intersection of Gender, Caste, and State Violence

1. Caste and Gendered Oppression in Postcolonial India

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is not merely a critique of patriarchy or state violence in isolation, but a powerful interrogation of how caste, gender, and political identity intersect to reinforce systemic oppression. Dopdi Mejhen, as an Adivasi woman, occupies the lowest rung of India's social hierarchy—marginalized not only as a woman but also as a tribal insurgent. Her oppression is twofold, dictated by both her gender and her caste, placing her in a double bind of erasure and exploitation. Unlike upper-caste women, who are often protected within the structures of Brahmanical patriarchy, tribal women like Dopdi are rendered disposable, their bodies seen as battlefields upon which state power is enacted.

The treatment of Adivasi women in postcolonial India echoes colonial strategies of control, where the sexual subjugation of native women served as both a political and psychological weapon. Historically, British colonial officers often exoticized and brutalized indigenous women, reinforcing the idea that lower-caste and tribal women exist outside the realm of purity, deserving neither honour nor legal protection. The Indian state, inheriting many of these colonial structures of violence, continues this tradition through its militarized operations against Naxalite and Adivasi communities, using rape as an institutionalized method of suppression.

2. State-Sponsored Sexual Violence as a Tool of Control

In *Draupadi*, rape is not an isolated act of sexual violence—it is a systemic, state-sanctioned weapon of war. The Indian paramilitary forces do not simply capture Dopdi to extract information or punish her for her political actions; they strip, mutilate, and rape her as a calculated demonstration of state power. This act serves multiple political functions:

- To dismantle Dopdi's revolutionary identity – The state believes that by raping Dopdi, they will reduce her from a political insurgent to a powerless, humiliated woman.
- To send a message of fear to the larger Naxalite movement – The brutalization of Dopdi is meant to instill terror within other tribal rebels, particularly women, warning them that defiance will be met with extreme bodily punishment.
- To reinforce male dominance through sexual conquest – In patriarchal structures, sexual violence is not just an assault on an individual but a reaffirmation of male supremacy, proving that women's bodies are always subject to masculine control.

The paramilitary forces expect Dopdi to emerge from this experience broken, begging for mercy, and falling into the traditional role of the "dishonoured woman". However, their expectations of submission are completely overturned by Dopdi's final act of defiance.

Forms of Oppression i n <i>Draupadi</i>	Perpetrators	Impact on Dopdi
Caste-based marginaliza tion	Brahmanical patriarchy	Excludes her from legal and social protection
State-sponsored violence	Indian military forces	Uses her body as a tool of political control
Sexual violence as a weapon	Paramilitary officers	Intended to break her spirit but instead fuels her resistance

Through Dopdi’s journey, Mahasweta Devi exposes the horrifying reality of how gendered violence operates within state politics, proving that rape is not merely an act of physical aggression, but a deeply political tool designed to erase female agency and instill collective fear. However, what makes Draupadi revolutionary is that Dopdi refuses to be erased. Instead of submitting to silence, she forces the state to confront its own failures by transforming her violated body into a site of resistance.

III. Dopdi’s Defiance: Rewriting the Myth of Draupadi

1. Draupadi in the Mahabharata vs. Dopdi Mejhen in Mahasweta Devi’s Story

Mahasweta Devi deliberately draws a parallel between Dopdi Mejhen and the Draupadi of the Mahabharata, yet subverts the classical narrative to highlight the radical transformation of a female character from a victim to a revolutionary figure. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi is disrobed in the Kaurava court, humiliated before men who seek to strip her of dignity. However, she is ultimately saved by divine intervention, as Lord Krishna ensures that her sari remains endless, preventing her from being exposed. This moment in the epic reinforces Draupadi’s dependence on external protection—her honour is upheld not through her own actions, but through the intervention of a male deity. Dopdi Mejhen, however, is not given divine protection. She is captured, tortured, and raped by the paramilitary forces, with no Krishna to come to her aid. However, instead of pleading for salvation, she subverts the expectation of shame and submission. Unlike Draupadi, who prays for protection, Dopdi actively rejects the idea of concealment.

Table 1: Draupadi in the Mahabharata vs. Dopdi Mejhen in Mahasweta Devi’s Story

Draupadi (Mahabharata)	Dopdi Mejhen (Mahasweta Devi's <i>Draupadi</i>)
Saved by divine intervention (Krishna)	No divine saviour—left to face violence alone
Helpless victim seeking protection	Uses her violated body as a tool of defiance
Symbol of honour and chastity	Symbol of radical rebellion
Humiliated but ultimately shielded	Publicly challenges her oppressors without fear

By denying Dopdi the mythic protections granted to Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi forces her to construct her own form of resistance, free from the patriarchal safety nets of religious or moral intervention.

2. Nakedness as Power: Dopdi's Final Act of Rebellion

The most subversive and politically radical moment in *Draupadi* is Dopdi's refusal to clothe herself after her rape. When her captors expect her to cover herself in shame, she chooses to walk toward Senanayak—the officer responsible for her capture—completely naked, staring him down with fearless defiance.

- This act completely reverses the expected dynamics of power:
- The rapists expected submission—Dopdi gives them resistance.
- They sought to erase her identity—she forces them to confront her undiminished existence.
- They anticipated a broken, silent woman—instead, she strips them of their ability to assert dominance.
- Dopdi's nakedness is not a symbol of shame, but rather a weapon against the men who sought to destroy her agency. She refuses to be a "dishonoured woman," instead using her violated body as a site of confrontation. Her final words, where she challenges her oppressors by stating:
- "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how will you defeat me?"
- encapsulate the radical politics of the story—proving that rape is not always a tool of erasure, but can instead become the very spark that ignites defiance.

The Psychological Impact of Dopdi's Resistance

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Dopdi's defiance forces her captors to experience an inversion of power. According to Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial violence, the oppressors seek to dehumanize their victims, believing that brutality will strip them of their identity and force them into submission. However, when the victim rejects submission and instead confronts their oppressor with resilience, the psychological impact is destabilizing.

Senanayak, the paramilitary officer responsible for Dopdi's capture, is paralyzed in the final scene, unable to look at the naked woman standing before him. This moment reveals a shift in power:

Dopdi is not ashamed, but Senanayak is unable to meet her gaze. She does not seek protection, but he is visibly uncomfortable in the face of her unflinching defiance.

He, the man in power, is reduced to silence, while she, the victim, speaks the final words.

This disruption of the colonial-patriarchal hierarchy is what makes Draupadi such a revolutionary text. It transforms the trope of the violated woman into the figure of the insurgent, proving that violence does not always silence women—it can also make them louder than ever before.

V. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi redefines sexual violence not as an endpoint of female subjugation but as the trigger for radical defiance. Dopdi Mejhen's refusal to clothe herself after rape dismantles the patriarchal belief that a violated woman is powerless, proving that shame belongs to the oppressors, not the oppressed. Unlike Draupadi in the Mahabharata, who is saved by divine intervention, Dopdi rescues herself by turning her nakedness into an act of defiance, stripping her captors of their authority. This study highlights how rape, often used as a tool of state-sponsored suppression, fails when women refuse to submit. Dopdi's resilience exposes the fragility of male power, proving that sexual violence cannot erase identity when met with unyielding defiance. Future research can explore comparative feminist resistance in postcolonial literature, analysing how caste, gender, and state violence shape women's responses to oppression. Draupadi remains a landmark feminist text, proving that true resistance lies not in escape, but in confronting one's oppressors without fear.

References

Primary Source

1. Devi, Mahasweta. Draupadi, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In *Breast Stories*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997.
2. Secondary Sources on Mahasweta Devi's Works
3. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1987.
4. Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
5. Tharu, Susie and Lalita, K. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1991.
6. Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993.
7. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
8. *Critical Studies on Feminist Theory and Postcolonialism*
9. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1953.
10. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
11. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1961.
12. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.