



Resistance as Embodied Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice"

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Something fearful has happened somewhere. The *nation* doesn't know it.

(Mahasweta Devi, "Behind the Bodice," emphasis added)

Experience and knowledge might seem interchangeable terms. However, when theoretically examined, they pose a conflicting dilemma in their respective nature and relation with each other. On one hand, knowledge is primarily derived from experience. The intrinsic characteristic of intimacy and immediacy of any experience categorizes it as highly subjective. Knowledge, on the other hand, is categorized as objective, pertaining to a certain universal appeal. Hereby arises a schism between the two concepts: experience and knowledge. This paper sets out to interrogate the complex relationship between the two concepts through a critical examination of Mahasweta Devi's short fiction, "Draupadi" (1981) and "Behind the Bodice" (1996). The protagonists of these stories emerge as agents of resistance as the body becomes a crucial site of embodiment of experience. The complexity of experience and its role in the formation of the subject is explored through the course of this paper.

Nation building became a significant enterprise in the formation of the identity of the postcolonial India. This identity was premised upon a certain idea of uniformity which led to the homogenization of the nation's people into a particular perspective. Such perspective, in modern day liberal democracies, is exercised by the state and its various apparatuses (both repressive as well as ideological) to form a singular notion of the nation based on dominant/majoritarian views, thus stripping off its heterogeneity. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explain this function of the nation-state in *Who Sings the Nation-State?*:

If the state is what "binds," it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes. If it does the latter, it is not always through emancipatory means, i.e. through "letting go" or "setting free"; it expels precisely

through an exercise of power that depends upon barriers and prisons and, so, in the mode of a certain containment. (4–5)

Mahasweta Devi's fiction questions this prerogative of the nation-state by exploring the lives of female subalterns. It is significant to understand the double marginalization that a female subaltern is subjected to as Spivak emphasizes in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor... It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (2203)

Dopdi and Gangor, the protagonists of "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice," respectively, are direct victims of the repressive state apparatus. Louis Althusser points out that the repressive state apparatus contains 'the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons.' The word 'repressive' implies that the State Apparatus in question 'functions by violence – at least ultimately' (Althusser 1490). This repressive state apparatus maintains dominant ideology through oppression of the marginalized—the other—whose identity hampers the process of homogenization and 'unification.' The 'other' is significantly subordinate to the 'dominant' in the hierarchy of power and political relation which makes it the 'subaltern.' The Santhal tribe, to which Dopdi Mejhen belongs, becomes the 'subaltern' as it has been rendered 'inferior' through violent historical events of oppression that has its roots in the Aryan invasion and stretches from colonial exploitation to state sanctioned violence.

Knowledge and experience become grounds of contestation in the course of these stories. In "Draupadi," Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhali revolutionary, is on the run from the army troops who have been assigned to forest Jharkhani to repress the rising rebellion among the peasants and tribals against their historical subjugation. The seed of armed revolt can be sourced back to the Santhal Rebellion of 1855. Forming a corrupt nexus, the British and the local zamindars, first arbitrarily auctioned the Santhal land, and then introduced the system of currency to a community which followed the barter system. Inevitably dependent on the local zamindars for money, the Santhals fell into a vicious cycle of never ending debt which bonded generations into this

exploitative system. The Rebellion, therefore, was a reaction against this highly exploitative regime of the colonial rule and the zamindari system forced upon the Santhals. This rebellion, called ‘Hul’ in the local language, predated the 1857 revolt; yet the former is effaced from our history textbooks while the latter is celebrated as the ‘first’ war of independence. This selective historicizing is reflective of how knowledge is manipulated to create the myth of unity on which the idea of nation-state prevails.

There was no improvement in the conditions of the tribal community even Post-Independence. Robbed of their own land, the trap of debt deteriorated their right to life as they were deprived of basic necessities—food, water, and shelter. Years of exploitation led to the Naxalite Movement which aimed at killing the parasitic exploiters—landowners, moneylenders, bureaucrats, policemen, and the state army. Being deprived from drinking water during draught,¹ Dopdi, Dulna (her husband), and fellow Santhals decided to kill Surja Sahu—the exploitative zamindar. The indignation arising from being swindled in an incessant debt-trap is echoed by Dulna while executing Surja Sahu: “I’ll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay that debt” (Devi 27).

Senanayak, the army chief, represents the repressive state apparatus in the story, “Draupadi,” whose function is to ensure ‘class oppression’ and guarantee the ‘conditions of exploitation and its reproduction’ (Althusser 1492). The killing of Surja Sahu (the zamindar) ignites his “hunt” for the ‘main culprits’—Dopdi and Dulna. The army chief safeguards the interests of the State and its partners—the wealthy landlords (in this story)—who form an alliance on the basis of capitalist profit sharing which runs on, perennially sustaining the status quo of subjugation. He is introduced as a shrewd army-chief who ‘in *theory*’ respects the enemy ‘whatever his practice’ may be. His dictum for combat—“*In order to destroy the enemy, become one (theoretically)*”² demands knowledge about the tribal revolutionaries. This underlines

¹In the story the quarrel over water begins when Surja Sahu is confronted with the fact that the ‘untouchables don’t get water’ (Devi 26). This emphasis becomes crucial as the ones who are deprived of drinking water comprise of tribals, Dalits, and poor farmers—the ones whose existence challenges the myth of the nation-state.

²The English words used in the original Bengali text have been italicized in the English translation by Spivak to mark the difference. Spivak elaborates the purpose of retaining such a distinction in the translation: “[It] makes the English page difficult to read. The difficulty is a reminder of the intimacy of the colonial encounter. Mahasweta’s stories are *postcolonial*.”

the authorial signification that Senanayak desires—the desire to know and therefore, author(ise). He is adamant along with his ‘tribal-specialists’³ to decipher Dopdi’s song that she sung right before killing Surja Sahu. He adopts ‘the hunter’s way, not the soldier’s’ to apprehend Dopdi. Furthermore, being a reader of anti-fascist and rebellion literature (*The Deputy, First Blood*), Senanayak publishes articles in which he demolishes ‘the gentlemen’ (*bhadralok*—for whom he maintains the status quo of repression) and highlights ‘the message of the harvest workers’ (Devi 19–22). In this sense, Senanayak can be seen as the ‘Author’⁴ of tribal subjugation as he annihilates and eliminates revolutionaries—firstly, through ‘the male organ’ of his gun and, secondly, in his theorization, by reducing them to objects of intellectual scrutiny. Dopdi’s text is indecipherable to Senanayak which entices him as an ‘Author’ to give it a meaning. This process of meaning-making to gain knowledge, which he further intellectualizes, begins at the level of “experiential space.”

Gopal Guru defines ‘experiential space’ as ‘a culturalized phenomenon’ in which the ‘...experience that some of the social groups gain from their spatial location’⁵ is reproduced primarily to control people in ‘finite, enclosed, and divided sites’ (78). Guru further asserts that the ‘production of experience’ is inextricably linked to the reproduction of ideologically restructured spaces over time leading to the ‘stability and continuation’ of experience(s) in different forms. Hence, it becomes a means to ‘morally paralyze the victim.’ Within this paradigm, even though ‘the constitutive source of experience’ resides with ‘the tormentor,’ the resultant experience as perceived by the victim does not necessarily conform to the desired result expected by the former. Guru further comments: “For the tormentor, experience acts as a political condition to maintain domination, while the theoretician uses it as a tool of theorization...both these attempts achieve their success based on the objectification of the victim” (82). Therefore, Senanayak as the tormentor and the theoretician strives to author(ise) the experience of the Naxal revolutionaries and, more specifically, of Dopdi. Authorship of experience, then, becomes the ground of contestation in either reproducing the experiential space of the status quo, or subverting it, through authorizing one’s subjective response as against the desired response. Therefore, experience becomes the domain which can be ‘subjectively realized,’ even if it is ‘...objectively produced through the logic of space’ (Guru 72).

³Elite intellectuals—upper-caste Bengalis—the *bhadralok*.

⁴In the Barthesian sense, structurally, the Author-God exercises dominance.

⁵Guru emphasizes, “Space is a culturally constructed phenomenon.” It should not be seen as a neutral geographical marker.

Senanayak's "hunt" for Dopdi and, by extension, other tribal revolutionaries has already instilled in the latter an experiential knowledge—if they are caught, they will be "countered." The linguistic aberration of the term "encounter" to Dopdi's "kounter" is indicative of the shifted signified—it is not the official police encounter that is referred to by the latter, rather the undocumented state-sponsored killings. As Dopdi is apprehended⁶ Senanayak feels both 'triumphant and despondent' at the same time. This despondency arises as Dopdi surrenders, staking herself for her community—thereby out manoeuvring his attempt to quell the naxal insurgency. She '...ululates with the force of her entire being' right before she is taken into custody, alerting her fellow comrades to escape. This agitates the virility of Senanayak and, therefore, he commands: "Make her. *Do the needful*" (Devi 31).

The parallels between *Mahabharata*'s Draupadi and 'Comrade Dopdi' intensify as the last sequence plays out. Analogizing Draupadi, who is disrobed while she menstruates, Dopdi is subjected to custodial rape. However, the contrast is crucial. There is no Krishna, no forefather, no Dulna, no male paternalistic figure in the form of God-Author-Male to 'protect' her. Hereafter, Dopdi enters the gendered experiential space that is meted out on her body. Her body becomes a site of experience as the brutality of sexual violence unfolds: "Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn" (Devi 31). Within the phallogocentric signification of power dynamics multiple rapes are meted out on her body to effectuate, through humiliation, the emotion of shame. As Udaya Kumar points out, "Humiliation comprises of acts of enforced shame" (184). Enforced shame paralyzes oneself as the individual is forced into a realm of 'undesired visibility' wherein the subject is unable to inhabit or escape from the experiential space (Kumar 184).

Dopdi's resistance emerges from the experienced subject, who counters the phallogocentric nation-state discourse, subverting the system of signification. She walks in her naked black body bathed in blood, to confront Senanayak. Dopdi's 'indomitable laughter' and her nakedness is incomprehensible to Senanayak; he finds himself unable to question—"What is this?" As Dopdi pushes Senanayak 'with her two mangled breasts' and asks: "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?... What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me - ?" Senanayak is completely defeated as

⁶Apprehend means both to arrest and to understand. This point becomes pertinent as Dopdi enters into the experiential space which leads her to experiencing (and in the process understanding) her subjectivity. This also presents another example of the shifted signified as Senanayak fails to "understand" Dopdi at the end of the story.

the phallic power of repressive state apparatus as well as his cognitive abilities abandon him. He also fails to engender shame in Dopdi as she rejects the system of male signification that undermines her and inhabits her sexually mutilated body as a weapon of naked protest. At the end of the story Senanayak is rendered mute and his textual manifestations (torment and theory) are silenced as he stands ‘...before an unarmed target, terribly afraid’ (Devi 33).

Mahasweta Devi’s “Behind the Bodice” offers a sharp critique of how the female body is fetishized within cultural spaces. The juxtaposition of popular culture and the so-called high art captures the experiential space that delineates women’s bodies as an “object” of voyeuristic pleasure. On one hand, a song of titillation (*Choli ke Piche Kya Hai?*),⁷ from Subhash Ghai’s film *Khalnayak* (1993), notoriously became the ‘norm of the day’ while contemporary issues such as crop failure, *Naramada Bachao Andolan*⁸ were designated as ‘non-issues’ by the prevailing ignorance of the nation’s people (Devi 119–120). Theodor Adorno’s take on the sociological implications of what he and Max Horkheimer termed as the “culture industry” analyses how ‘the expression “industry” is not to be taken too literally’ as their primary function is to produce an effect, elicit a response from its consumer—that of seduction, shock, and awe (Wilson 29). In a satiric narration, “what is there [behind the bodice]?” became the ‘national issue’; it became a phrase of common parlance (Devi 119).

Upin Puri is an archival photographer whose ‘pictures go at top rates abroad’ and who documents drought, famine, polluted rivers, etc., across the remotely underdeveloped regions of India. In one such project in Jharoa, he photographs the Dalit migrant labourer, Gangor, who was breastfeeding her child. This image is published as a newspaper report along with the headline: “The half-naked⁹ ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. *Save them! Save the breast!*” He fetishizes over Gangor’s “mammal projections” as “statuesque” and goes on to describe its “aesthetic value” as an “object” of art—‘the cleavage of her Konarak chest,’ ‘like the cave paintings of Ajanta,’ ‘the breasts of the girls at Elora are eroding.’¹⁰ Following the publication of Upin’s article, Gangor’s breasts are subjected to the

⁷Translation: What is behind the bodice?

⁸This refers to the social movement initiated by activist Medha Patkar against construction of dams in the regions of central India uprooting native tribals and farmers.

⁹Nakedness emerges as an important medium of protest performance in both the stories. On the one hand, it means ‘exposed to harm; vulnerable.’ Conversely, it also means ‘expressed openly.’ (Oxford Dictionary).

¹⁰Konarak, Ajanta, and Elora are erotic sculptural examples which are international and national tourist spots.

gaze of millions of people through the newspaper article and an implicit violence deepens through the collective male gaze. When questioned about his obsession towards Gangor's breasts, Upin declares to his assistant: "Learn to praise and respect a beautiful thing... *There lies all the mystery.*" Gangor's breasts become a quest for Upin. For him they are "*natural, hence unique*" and he wants to "*preserve*" them as he feels they are "*endangered*" (Devi 122–6, emphasis added).

Susan Sontag outlines photography as 'an ethics of seeing' and further details how 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed' by claiming '...a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power' (2). Thus, picture-taking becomes an experiential space for Gangor and 'a semblance of knowledge' for Upin and the world that reviews his photograph (Sontag 18). Gangor's social reality as a Dalit migrant laborer, working on a piece wage basis, is not the subject of Upin's photography. He rather produces a voyeuristic picture of titillation whose focal point is to sexualize Gangor's breasts within a system of phallogocentric signification. The penetrative lens of Upin's camera leads to the horrendous performance of sexual violence by the repressive state apparatus—Gangor is gang-raped by the local police of Seopura—because she 'jiggled her body all the time' being a '[s]hameless country girl' (Devi 132). Gangor is doubly raped: first by Upin's archival photography and then by police. As the text narrates, "There is no *non-issue* behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known" (Devi 138). This narratorial comment suggests Upin's complicity in his deliberate ignorance of the consequence of his archivization of dispossessed people—rape of the people—wherein knowledge sought through ethnographic documentation takes an unethical turn. As Sontag points out, photography becomes an act equivalent to 'sexual voyeurism' if it maintains the status quo. Likewise, Upin's attempt to "understand" the "mystery" behind Gangor's breasts leads to an interpretative exercise of imposing a phallogocentric meaning to the Dalit migrant's decontextualized body (in the photograph) by sexualizing it.

Gangor's body first becomes a 'sight' of knowledge for the world through Upin's photography sans its ethnographic and cultural context (Dalit migrant laborer in Jharoa). Subsequent sexual violence meted out on her body results in her body becoming a site of experience. Gangor emerges as a resistant subject who claims authorship over her experience—she accuses the police for their crime and registers a case against them. In her final confrontation with Upin she performs a defiant naked protest wherein she takes off her blouse to shock

Upin's penetrative gaze with "two dry scars" which are not the breasts that he fetishized (Devi 137). At this moment of final confrontation Upin's ethnographic endeavor—his way of seeing it as a meaning-making enterprise—is challenged through Gangor's experiential knowledge. The order of expected responses is reversed as it effectuates shame in Upin instead of satisfaction, he undergoes a moral paralysis wherein he is neither able to inhabit the newly attained consciousness of his ethnographic violence nor able to escape it.

It is crucial to note that both Dopdi and Gangor are introduced as experienced and resistant subjects at the onset of their respective stories; they subvert the homogenizing myth of the nation-state through the assertion of their identity as subalterns. However, it is only when they enter the experiential space of sexual violence meted out to invoke shame in them that they emerge as defiant gendered subalterns. As the body becomes the primary site of experience, naked performance, by both Dopdi and Gangor, emerges as resistance which in turn results from the embodiment of experience in these stories. Kathleen Canning discusses the significance of embodiment of experiences and social identities with respect to Elisabeth Grosz's notion of 'counterstrategic reinscription.' According to it, the body apart from being 'the site of knowledge-power' is also 'a site of resistance' as it '...exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic reinscription, for it is capable of being...self-represented in alternative ways' (Canning 505–6). Canning further comments, "Subjects thus produced are not simply the imposed results of alien, coercive forces; the body is internally lived, experienced, and acted upon by the subject and the social collectivity" (506). In light of this statement, nakedness becomes a means of agentive resistance rather than shameful vulnerability. Dopdi and Gangor's resistance defines them as gendered subaltern subjects. Such a redefinition signifies Dopdi and Gangor's attempts to recast their identity as politically legitimate subjects of justice—in this case as gendered subalterns.



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