

Translating the In-Scribed Body: Cultural Alterity and a Draupadi's Counter Narrative

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is the translation of a short story by late Mahasweta Devi titled "Draupadi" by Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak. The paper seeks to explore the journey of the narrative from the contextual subset of 20th century Bengali literature, to the pan-national and indeed the international literary field as a representative text of subaltern consciousness in the subcontinent. The paper seeks to explore the textual inscription of the (un)making of a tribal 'Draupadi' from the moment of her accidental christening, through complex cultural parallels, to the inevitable moment of her disrobing and after. The figure of Mahasweta's Draupadi strides across from beyond the pale of the mainstream cultural imaginary and forces a realignment of customary readings of the narrative of the legendary Draupadi and her infamous humiliation.

Keywords: *Draupadi, Mainstream cultural imaginary, Postcolonial, Alterity, Tribal namesake*

The subject of this paper is a translation of short story by late Mahasweta Devi "Draupadi" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the selection titled *Breast Stories* (1997). The paper seeks to explore the journey of the narrative from the contextual subset of 20th century Bengali literature to the pan-national and indeed international literary field as a representative text of subaltern consciousness in the subcontinent. Mahasweta Devi has written indefatigably about tribal issues and the lack of visibility in the mainstream discourse thereof.

She won numerous literary awards, including the Gyanpeeth Award for her fiction on tribal communities and the Magsaysay Award for her activist work for the cause of various DNTs, the de-notified tribes. Her writing career has been prolific with more than a hundred novels, twenty short story collections, scores of plays and journalistic pieces.

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in a comment on Mahasweta's alternative positioning vis-à-vis the mainstream literary and intellectual Bengali discourse says, "Mahasweta Devi is as unusual within the Bengali literary tradition as Foucault or Derrida is unusual in the philosophical or political mainstream in France." (*The Death of a Discipline*, 2003, p. 46). Not only is she unusual, she is also disruptive. Her work is paradigm altering, visibilising not merely an erased people; but also the processes of erasure, including those of the complicity of the mainstream intellectual tradition.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" first appeared in print in 1982. The Bangla original was translated in many Indian languages, and eventually also into English in the 1990s. The figure of Mahasweta's Draupadi strides across from beyond the pale of the mainstream cultural imaginary and forces a realignment of customary readings of the customary narrative of the legendary Draupadi and her infamous humiliation. The legendary heroine of the Hindu epic is interesting enough. Check-mated in an elaborate powerplay of patriarchal authority and cultural duplicity, she is, at once, humiliated and victorious. She is feminine and vulnerable in one instance and invincible and goddess-like in the next, suitably defended by the supreme Lord of the cosmos.

The postcolonial, tribal namesake is different. Named by her mother's Hindu mistress, she takes on a dubious intercultural significance. Claimed by narratives she does not understand, neither those of the Hindu cultural signifiers, nor those of postcolonial powerplays; she is nonetheless their 'target'. The tribal-nontribal interface is destructive by definition. The marks of the nation-state's violent inscriptions are borne by Draupadi's bare body. The inscriptions on the bare body, however, are laid bare in Draupadi's refusal to be clothed again. In the very moment that the body of the tribal woman is the ultimate object of the state's invasion, it also becomes the final bastion of resistance against it.

The paper seeks to explore the textual inscription of the (un)making of a 'Draupadi' from the moment of her accidental christening, through complex

cultural parallels, to the inevitable moment of her disrobing and after. The subaltern's text appears before a larger pan Indian and international readership thrice removed in language, space and time. It is mediated through three interventions: one, the trace of the tribal tongue, as talismanic as incomprehensible, finds inadvertent mention in the story. What-is-the-meaning-of-the-tribal-song is a recurrent concern for both Arjan Singh and Senanayak. All that their best investigators can find is that it is "Mundari language". The exact message remains undeciphered in the text right till the end. Spivak at one place mentions,

I cannot take this discussion of deconstruction far enough to show how Dopdi's song, incomprehensible and trivial (it is in fact about beans of different colours), and ex-orbitant to the story, marks the place of that 'other' that can be neither excluded nor recuperated. (*The Death of a Discipline*, 2003, p. 4)

Two, the fictionalization in Bengali is about the author ventriloquizing on behalf of the tribal subaltern subject, about a calamitously difficult moment in the tribal experience some ten years after the most strained phase of peasant insurgency and the state's ruthless repression of it. It takes another 20 years for this volatile bit of fiction to acquire an English translation. That the story still resonates after thirty years of its translation, is a paean to its intrinsic, artistic value, yes, but it is also a worrisome reminder of the ongoing and indeed escalating tribal peasant distress. The referent out there, in the case of certain fictions, is just way too urgent to be disregarded.

The movement from the context out there to the somewhat deferred Bangla original to finally the belated English translation also points to the massive time lapses it takes a subaltern narrative to find regional visibility, and in turn for a regional text to find an international audience. For the subaltern text to achieve this regional to postcolonial contiguity in this overstretched time frame is, perhaps, only natural; but contexts often do not have the luxury of enduring intact like fiction: they come together and fall apart a lot more quickly and calamitously than narratives. And they have collateral. And consequences.

The tribal identity and presence: tribal space as the heterotopic space of alterity. The nature of the modern polity in the subaltern heterotopic space is increasingly 'biopolitical' in its most sinister implications. Mitchel Foucault (1988) explains

biopolitics as the form of politics wherein the state wields absolute power over people as living beings. Typically, it is power of and over life. Giorgio Agamben describes biopolitics as “the growing inclusion of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power” (Agamben, 1998, p. 119). Biopolitics for Agamben is most conspicuous in its targeting of the human body as the site of political control.

The final control that the state seeks to establish is indeed over the bodies of the tribal insurgents. It is not necessarily interested in their welfare; it is merely interested in obtaining their bodies: dead or alive. The very body of the designated insurgent becomes the site for state control.

The space Draupadi inhabits is the forest of Jhadkhani and the surrounding villages, the place of primitive, incomprehensible “Neanderthal darkness” (metaphorically, a space left behind in time). It is at once the stuff of simplified handbooks and dossiers and at the same time, that of complete incomprehensibility: the space the state wants to control, without ever having to effectively administer. It is a space that can be cordoned off village after village and machinegunned indiscriminately, all in the name of law. It is by definition enemy territory, and as such needs to be contained. The only state presence is of police precincts, and naturally, the relationship the state has with these regions is all about “apprehension and elimination” (p. 23).

The police and the military presence sum up the nature of the state’s intervention in the impoverished region. There are no schools, no hospitals here, the only state presence is in terms of police precincts. The police, paramilitary and military forces periodically invited to contain insurgency here, are always from other parts of the country. They do not understand the region or the people. In fact, all Santhali, Mundari, Oraon “Afro-Asiatic tribes look the same to the special forces” (p. 20) because they have no long-term contact with them and therefore no acumen to comprehend or appreciate difference or complexity. Their understanding of the tribals is a very simple text-bookish understanding, which has no room for the complexity and grace of these ancient communities. For them the tribals are merely current or potential insurgents, an opinion promoted mercilessly by the colonial British who designated several tribal communities as born criminal in the Criminal Tribes Act. The deeply entrenched prejudices against them have survived their decriminalization. Commenting

on the plight of the millions thus ‘decriminalized’, G N Devy, in his study of denotified tribes titled *A Nomad called Thief* (2006) observes that the post-Independence nomenclature of Habitual Offenders Act (HOA) hasn’t quite managed to change the attitude towards these tribes, since the provisions of the former CT Act are still preserved in the HOA (p. 22). Devy points out how these DNTs face systemic persecution and are therefore constantly “on the run”, since “freedom has not yet reached them” (p. 23).

In “Draupadi”, the nomads are not just mere thieves. They are the designated “enemy of the state”, the traitors. They are often apprehended and destroyed at the behest of powerful landowners, moneylenders, brothel owners and local musclemen. They have no say in most matters, because literally their very language is incomprehensible to the state. The state machinery at one level is determined to figure them out, but very often aligns its interests with those of are engaged on total disregard of tribal people and tribal territories in pursuit of their own selfish ends regards them as completely dispensable.

The inhabitants of this tribal heterotopia are not citizens; they have no rights. They can be and are killed off with impunity: they constitute what Partha Chatterjee describes as the “political society” (*Lineages of Political Society*, 2011) not individual citizens but collective populations that the state administers as it deems fit, without allowing these collectivities any enduring stakes or rights in the body politic.

Draupadi is evoked in the text from various perspectives. First is the inevitable mythopoeic throwback in terms of the name herself: her name anticipates her humiliation and triumph. She is named, thus fated to be Draupadi. Kamaljit Sinha in her article “Deconstructing Patriarchal Structures in Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi” describes her as “at once a palimpsest and a contradiction”: evoking comparisons with the legendary heroine and also exploding through them. (Sinha, 2016, para. 3). Radha Chakravorty, too, in her reading of Draupadi’s naming remarks: “One of the most notable features of Mahasweta Devi’s writings is the visionary, utopia or myth-making impulse that acts as a counterbalance to her dystopian, “forensic”, critical perspective on the contemporary world.” (Chakravorty, 2011, p. 69).

The police dossier with which the story opens, pronounces her the enemy of the state, a most dangerous criminal who must be exterminated. Her positionality is

clearly irrelevant to the powers that be. The police fact-file baffles the uniformed policeman who can't understand why she doesn't have a tribal name. She has an unlisted name, and that is beyond comprehension. These state actors are so convinced of their rudimentary and simplistic ethnographic stereotypes of the tribals that they cannot comprehend these 'primitive' and 'simple' people as capable of any complexity or difference. Draupadi's name has an explanation. Surja Sahu's wife named her, since her mother worked for the former. Thus, a tribal supposedly comes to acquire a non-tribal Hindu name. The situation involves a *double entendre*. The Hindu mistress names her after supposedly the Hindu legend of Draupadi. The legend is assumed to be Hindu all right, but unlike Radha or Sita, Draupadi is not a popular name for Hindu girls. The legend, sensationally seared into the collective cultural memory is a bit of an uncomfortable presence. Not only because of what happens to her, but also because of who she is: the polyandrous heroine who is also a queen. It has been argued that the legend of Draupadi was a tribal legend to begin with and was incorporated into the great epic of the land at some later stage. The naming of Draupadi thus becomes an inadvertent restoration of an identity lost in time. Yet, in the tribal tongue, she is 'Dopdi': a shorn, diminished, obfuscated variant. The legendary Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is well known to have been salvaged by the master of the cosmos from a very public disrobing and humiliation. What is not all that well known is that her very presence in the epic is ultimately an appropriation by those that writ the will of the mainstream Hindu pantheon. One might argue of this acceptance of Draupadi within the epic is an emblem of a shared, syncretic lore: except that this is really not a case of an equal sharing. Draupadi is 'claimed' in this cultural mainstreaming also because her genesis in tribal traditions is clearly denied here. Draupadi/ Dopdi in the text is, therefore, a hearkening back to a forgotten legacy.

The issue that lies at the heart of the story is of peasant insurgency. The ongoing peasant distress and its outfalls, and the state's response to it, all need to be understood in the context of the post- Independence state and its relationship with resistance. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, the nation state seeks to promote an idea of political engagement wherein political participation is sanctioned in terms of guided and disciplined interactions between the state and its subjects. Consequently, it sees disruptive resistance movements as aberrant and criminal and takes it upon itself to destroy them (Chakrabarty, p.

3294). This is especially true of tribal insurgency movements which come up intermittently during the fifties and sixties, and after that become a constant feature in the tribal belts (Guha, p. 1891). According to Partha Chatterjee, the aggravation is further compounded because of the casting of the legions of peasantry as a mere “object” to be “acted upon, controlled and appropriated within the respective structures of state power” (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 7).

In “Draupadi” reported/ rumoured instances of peasant insurgency float around the regions of Jharkhand: the actions that supposedly keep erupting every now and then, thereby justifying the ongoing operations where special forces force these wild tribals to meet their makers against their will. It is against the state’s logic to have any kind of communication with the insurgents, so it reacts with violence and repression, killing with utter impunity, even when it runs out of people to kill. As the heterotopia, normalcy of any kind stands completely suspended. No one plays by the rules in this space marked by death and destruction. It has real or rumoured ‘actions’, i.e., instances of insurgency, which are curbed by unsparing and unmitigated ‘operations’, i.e., the state’s repression of insurgency. There are ‘kounters’ and counter narratives. It is only in terms of ‘kountered’ and ‘kountering’ narratives that any alternative views to the officially offered ones are made available, thereby revealing that the heterotopia’s fracture from the mainstream is as complete as it is painful.

Typically, the state in the heterotopia functions as a thanatopolitical presence; (reference) the state operates in terms of its power to kill. Death is the routine default consequence. Killings have a touch of medieval brutality and spectacle about them. Encounters, or Kounters as the tribals call them, result in head counts of mangled, mauled corpses. Tribal corpses in body bags, entire villagers ‘kountered’, corpses left for wild animals to scavenge are the general givens in terms of death rituals routinely denied. Dulna’s killing besides a forest stream in the fashion of a wild game hunt. His corpse is allowed to rot and scavenged clean by a variety of animals: it is supposed to function as bait for his associates. The assumption is that they will come to take the corpse away for the funeral rites, and when they do, they can be similarly shot dead too. They avoid his fate literally by denying him the very last rites which are generally considered sacred across cultures. Such sentimentalism is a luxury they cannot afford.

Dopdi’s apprehending precedes her destruction: the catchphrase being

apprehend and destroy. Senanayak, the encounter expert and extreme left politics specialist believes in knowing and becoming the enemy in order to anticipate and apprehend them. He succeeds in apprehending Draupadi after the special forces spend six years chasing her with no luck. He understands the peasant insurgents so well that he plans a sympathetic book on them sometime in the future. His theoretical 'becoming one of them' is supposed to ensure his long-term survival and relevance; ironically predicated upon his ability to exterminate them in the immediate present.

Draupadi too knows her enemy somewhat. When taken prisoner, her immediate response is the anguished war cry "*Maho*" with all the power in her being. She needs to warn her accomplices. Then she mentally catalogues the torture sequence and what she must do to not break before the enemy. She must bite off her tongue so that she may not talk. Her interrogation takes the predictable turn, when in the face of her stubborn refusal to talk, the decree is to "make her".

The (un)making of Draupadi begins: she is repeatedly raped through the night. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in "The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing" explains the nature of this assault: "Sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy's method of social control rather than pathology of sexual violence as such." (Rajan, 1999, p. 102). This sexual humiliation is clearly an exercise to demonstrate power. The entire collective act is a sort of collective violation of enemy territory.

Of course, no Gods defend this ordinary subaltern Draupadi's honour with any miraculous interventions. But then, it isn't theirs to defend. It is hers. She seizes agency when she owns her brutally raped body with unashamed dignity, refusing to clothe it dutifully in shame:

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, what's the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front to spit a bloody gab at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, Kounter me- Come on, Kounter me-? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before

an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

“Draupadi”, pp. 36-37.

Her body which is the site of the state’s brutal violation and humiliation, is also her final bastion of resistance. In this act of courageously claiming her body as her own, the tribal Draupadi emerges, at least in that brief moment of her voluble, undaunted confrontation of Senanayak, as truly triumphant.

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