Introduction

I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake. Since I never learnt to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation.

Mahasweta Devi in Preface to *Shrestho Golpo*

Born in Dhaka in 1926 to accomplished parents, Mahasweta Devi migrated to India after Partition. In the early 1950s, when she began to consider seriously, a career in writing, she assumed the penname Sumitra Devi out of fear that she might lose her Government job. Nevertheless, she lost her job at the Post and Telegraph Department twice. Both were cases of red baiting: first time she was dismissed because of her husband Bijon Chakraborty's communist affiliations. Following her reinstatement, she was dismissed again because books by Marx and Lenin were found in her desk drawer. She later moved into a career of teaching English Literature in college.

Recepient of several prestigious literary honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award (1979) and the Jnanpith Award (1996), Mahasweta Devi is a prolific writer with over a hundred titles to her credit spanning a wide range of genres – novels, plays, short stories and books for children in addition to contributing to several English and Bengali dailies. She also edits a Quarterly journal called *Bortika* (The Lamp). Her initial contact with the Munda tribes living in McLuskiegunge and Palamau districts of Bihar in 1965 developed into a lasting commitment to adivasi welfare. Devi retired from her educational career in 1984 and she devoted her energies to work for the betterment of the adivasis. In 1983 she founded the Paschim Banga Khedia Sobor Samiti to

She says in an interview to Samik Bandopadyay, "To emphasise the former at the expense of the latter is a denial of history as one sees it. For you it may be important that this story ("Rudali") is written by a woman... another woman has adapted it into a play.... But I think a writer (Mahasweta Devi) has written the story and a director (Usha Ganguly) has adapted it into a play. It is not very important for me whether it was done by a woman or not... I write as a writer and not as a woman"("Rudali" 17). Clearly Devi's emphasis is on the class and not the gender of her subjects. She writes with equal ease about the adivasi men and their exploitation within the mainstream society. However, in spite of Devi's denial it would be reductive not to look at her texts as sites of feminist concerns. Her feminism is ingrained in her writing which strives to free women from the stereotyping she's subjected to in the dominant patriarchal world. The woman is twice colonized and victimized as her body becomes the site of exploitation. Rape, therefore becomes a recurrent metaphor in Devi's works. In the Introduction to her translation of "Rudali", Anjum Katyal writes,

> There is no doubt that the text does privilege class and community over women's issues in isolation. And yet it has a special significance when read as a feminist text. The common accusation of those who privilege a cross class gender perspective to those who position gender issues within those of class is that the woman's position tends to get marginalized or elided over in the 'general' interest of the class. Perhaps because Mahasweta Devi writes from a class point of view but is herself a woman, there is no sign of this in her text, not even through slippages. In fact, her text shows us that gender and class need not be viewed as polarities; that one's discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered. One political stance need not rule out the other. (ibid 17)

Mahasweta Devi's feminism revolves around the assertion of the woman as an individual in her own right. Among the poor and the marginalized communities, a woman is very often considered to be the property of the landowners and the money lenders. In fact even rape which is considered to be a reprehensible act among the well heeled and the middle class holds an entirely different meaning for the oppressed and disenfranchised. "Bandit Queen" Phoolan Devi, a lower caste peasant woman who later became a dacoit had organized the Behmai killings in 1981. The Behmai killings saw the death of twenty two upper caste men. Phoolan Devi is said to have killed them to avenge her torment at being gangraped and paraded naked in her village. In an interview to the Atlantic monthly, she talks about her torment. She emphasizes that hers was not a unique case and that this was the fate of all such women who had the misfortune to be born in poor low caste homes.

> ... What you call rape, that kind of thing happens to poor women in the villages everyday. It is assumed that the daughters of the poor are for the use of the rich. They assume that we are their property. In the villages the poor have no toilets, so we must go to the fields, and the moment we arrive, the rich lay us there; we can't cut the grass or tend to our crops without being accosted by them. We are the property of the rich... They wouldn't let us live in peace; you will never understand what kind of humiliation that is. If they wanted to rape us, to molest us, and our families objected, then they would rape us in front of our families. (Phoolan Devi, 78)

Several women characters portrayed by Mahasweta Devi belong to these oppressed sections of the society who are forced to fight for their basic sustenance. Caught in the grim battle of class, caste and poverty, her women protagonists chart out their own paths of self-realization. More often than not it is not limited to debunking patriarchy, but attempts a redefinition of the woman's role in the severest of adverse situations. Mahasweta's canvas is vast – from the palaces of the Queens depicted in the *Mahabharata* to the bonded labour of Palamau – in which she examines the patterns of the domination of class, caste and patriarchy. She also looks at her own social surroundings closely exposing the hypocrisies of the middle class and the utter insensitivity of the state funded attack on the Naxals where a human being is reduced to being a corpse which merely bears a number to facilitate identification.

In a retelling of the *Mahabharata*, Mahasweta shifts the focus to the dispossessed women whose husbands are forced to participate in the war. Seen from their eyes, the grand battle loses all its sheen. Instead of the "Dharmayuddha" it is seen as mass murder where the only beneficiaries are the Royals who fight this war to satiate their greed. In "Panchakanya" the five dispossessed wives of foot soldiers paint an entirely different picture of the war at Kurukshetra. The narrative carries a message as these women of "Janavritta" or commoners teach the young widow Uttara how to cope with her life which is rendered meaningless due to widowhood. Interestingly, among the Royals, a woman is allowed only a half life when her husband is no more. In young Uttara's case the trauma is manifold more as she loses her husband barely six months into her marriage. Her unborn child remains the sole cause for her existence but here, too, she knows that the joy of motherhood will be short lived as the Princes of the Royal families are reared by the wet nurses. For Uttara, life becomes an endless wait for death. However, the Panchakanya – whose names derive from the names of rivers, continue to flow towards life. They teach Uttara that life is not static. They too have lost their loved ones but they will marry again and have children. They will keep alive the cycle of births and deaths. It is their pragmatic and robust

had every right to live. The leaders, who led the people to face the guns of the police and found for themselves the safest shelters under police protection, had every right to live. But Brati was a worse criminal than them. Because he had lost faith in this society ruled by profit-mad businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest. Once this loss of faith assails a boy, an adolescent, or a youth, it does not matter whether he is twelve, sixteen or twenty two, death was his portion. ((ibid 19)

Nandini, Brati's comrade in arms echoes his sentiments. It is from her that Sujata learns about the idealism of these youths. Years of torture by the police have rendered her semi-blind yet it is through her eyes that Sujata learns about the movement. Nandini also informs her how the state still continues to hound the Naxalites and the press continues to turn a blind eye. She says;

How else can one explain the walls raised higher around prisons, the watchtowers? Why doesn't a single person raise his voice when thousands of young men are rotting in the prisons? And when they do, they keep the interests of their political parties in mind? How is it that we who would like to carry on, can not print a single bulletin? Why are we denied the simple facilities of a printing press and newsprint while innumerable journals come out, continue to come out, and one hears that they were sympathetic to the cause? Betrayal. There are all those who talk for the sake of talking, never realizing that in the process they are betraying us....Why do the round ups continue? The firing within prisons? The arrests? Betrayal. (ibid 78)

It is only after her meeting with Nandini that Sujata can ask her husband to leave the room. She faces him squarely and reminds him of his total insensitivity. When Dibyanath leaves the room, her sole regret is that Brati had not lived to see his mother come into her own. Her final rejection of the society she lives in comes in the form of a severe physical agony while in her mind she wows never to abandon the Bratis of the world. Her husband rationalizes it by saying 'the appendix has burst' but Sujata's mind echoes her protest:

Did Brati die so that these corpses with their putrefied lives could enjoy all the images of poetry of the world, the red rose, the green grass, the neon lights, the smiles of mothers, the cries of children – for ever? Did he die for this? To leave this world to these corpses?
Never. (ibid 126)

Unlike Sujata who is trapped in her upper middle class milieu and whose political awakening takes place only when she loses her beloved son, Draupadi is a comrade in the Naxal movement. In a retelling of the *Mahabharata,* Mahasweta recreates an avatar of the fiesty Draupadi in Dopdi, the tribal girl who is a dreaded terrorist in the eyes of the law.

Emphasizing the kinship, Mahasweta writes,"Remember, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is a black woman. She must have been a tribal. In the state of Himachal Pradesh we still find the sort of fraternal polyandry that Darupadi was supposed to have practiced in the *Mahabharata*. The polyandrous tribal women of Himachal Pradesh are said to belong to the Draupadi gotra" (*Imaginary Maps* i).

Draupadi brings forward the struggle of a Santhal woman – black like the epic's Draupadi. She is called "Dopdi" – a Santhali pronunciation of her Sanskrit name. But that is where the similarity ends. Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* is the Queen of the mighty Pandavas. She is regal and is known for her legendary beauty. Dopdi, on the contrary does not even have the luxury of rubbing kerosene in her hair to ward off lice lest the smell of kerosene gives away her trail. Draupadi, the Queen is also the symbol of violated sexuality as one of her husbands pawns her in a game of dice. Draupadi is dragged into the men's domain from her menstrual seclusion. Legend has it that her cries of help are heard by Lord Krishna who makes her sari so long that attempts at disrobing her fail. However, Draupadi's open hair becomes a constant reminder to the Pandava brothers that they would have to avenge her and kill the Kauravas in the process. Dopdi, too, is violated sexually but not only does she refuse to pray for divine intervention, she refuses to be clothed thereby charting out a new domain outside the confines of patriarchy.

Dopdi Mejhen's fight is more basic – she fights for water. Water that is so abundant in Surja Sahu's well but the untouchables are not allowed to drink from the wells. There is drought in the land and people are dying of starvation.

That was a troubled time. Dopdi is confused when she thinks about it.Operation Bakuli in Bakuli. Surja Sahu arranged with Biddibabu to dig two tubewells and three wells within the compound of his two houses. No water anywhere, drought in Birhbhum. Unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as the crow's eye. (*Breast Stories* 29)

"Draupadi" first appeared in *Agnigarbha* or *Womb of fire* in 1977. The aboriginal Draupadi who sees herself as a soldier "rank and file" (ibid 189) in the Naxalite movement, emerges from a long tradition of the Santhal's resistance to the violation of women that makes her "proud of her forefathers who stood guard over their women's black blood in black armour"(ibid 31) The Munda revolt of 1831-32 and the Santhal rebellion of 1855-57, focused both on issues of appropriation of their land by dikus or outsiders and the sexual violence the settlers inflicted on the labouring women. Around Independence in the mid twentieth century, abuse of women was addressed in the Warli movement in Maharashtra in 1945-57, the agrarian movement in

inviolable social relationship. The landlord is considered as god or father, legal bond as sacrosanct, ancestral obligation as sacred. The legal bond is thus transformed into a religious cultural bond which replaces the legality. Here Devi's drama experiments with what Frederick Jameson calls the "omnipresence of culture" in which the economy and culture collapse into each other. To quote Stephen Greenblatt, culture, as the "assemble of beliefs and practices. . . functions as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behaviour must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform" (Critical Terms for Literary Study, 225).

In "Aajir" Paatan, an aajir is the protagonist of the play, who narrates the tradition of bonded labour continuing from time immemorial to the present time and holding succeeding generations in thralldom. That he narrates his own woe proves that he is becoming conscious of his situation and distinguishes him from his ancestors who silently suffered. Narration leads to enactment in which Paatan plays one of his earliest ancestors Golak Kura, living in the hills of Ayodhya afflicted by famine, who sold away himself and his wife Gairabi Dasi for a price of three rupees only to landlord Ravana Sunari and bound his progeny to perpetual slavery to Ravana a :d Ravana's progeny. There is a pun on the word 'bond', which signifies the legal document signed between the creditor and the debtor and the kinship bond that binds Paatan to the pledge made by his ancestor, and also the bondage, a bonded labour has to suffer. The play works out these multiple meanings of the word.

The reference to Ayodhya and Ravana evokes the myth of the Ramayana, which in this context has several implications. First, the people of Ayodhya hills (not Ayodhya city) are the people from the fringe, who are beyond the reach of the welfare state that Ram Rajya represents at its best. Ravana, represented in the play as Ravana Sunari, remains invincible as the archetypal figure of exploitation as he, not Ram, as the play suggests, reappears in various incarnations. Here is a subtle attempt at the demythification of the Ram Rajya. Second, the act of selling oneself and one's wife, that too, in Ayodhya recalls the myth of Raja Harischandra, the pious king of Ayodhya, who sold himself and his wife to pay Rishi Viswamitra his *dakshina*, a customary complementary to the charity he had given. This too has two implications. In the past a king could accept the life of a bonded labourer on oath, voluntarily renounce his kingdom for the sake of piety, whereas the present day rulers are ruthlessly acquisitive and materialist. The second implication is ironical in relation to the present day context and the main situation of the play, that suggestively questions various patriarchal myths that celebrate the right of Harischandra to sell his wife and son and, of Ramchandra to put Sita through the agni pariksha, and even of Yudhisthir

to stake his wife Draupadi and his brothers in a game of dice. In the same patriarchal tradition perpetuated by the upper caste/class, Golak sold his wife and descendants, the descendants who were in the womb of future. So far as the position of the woman is concerned she is a slave to her husband and a slave woman is exposed to all sorts of exploitation by her master and mistress and to the patriarchal control of her husband. She is, in the process, reduced to a commodity, a non-human- an object.

The Man with the Dhol in the beginning of the play acts as a choric character, who introduces the background and central theme of the play through narration and dramatization. A dhol-player has been appropriately used by Devi as an expositor of the heritage of bonded labour, because as a member of a marginalized untouchable community he shares the sufferings of this downtrodden section. And as a folk artiste he has the insight into the tradition, the present situation and has the power to express them. There is another significance of this device. Usually dhol players were employed by kings and landlords to make royal announcements, sometimes the announcement of the arrival of royal personages. Here, in the play, ironically the dhol player is made to announce the arrival of a bonded labourer. Golak's entry lends a heroic dimension to the stoical suffering of the marginalized. The irony emerges out of the discrepancy between the style and content, between the formal declamatory manner of presentation and the theme of inhuman slavery. This creates a sense of absurdity that can be described as a mixture of pathos and ridicule. The dhol player announces:

> Look at this man, everybody ! Born in a land of famines, nurtured by famines Golak Kura scared of famines has now doomed his descendants to the lives of aajirs. (4)

That Golak Kura is nurtured by famines is ironical too. This implies that his state of a bonded labourer is a product of a situation of famine and the tribe of bonded labourer increases due to famines. Added to it is the fact that people are often slaves not owing to themselves but owing to others, their forefathers. There is a compounded sense ironies about their existence. They do not know what is written in the bond that binds them, what are its terms and conditions how far and how long it is legally valid. Generations after generations they find themselves in pre-natal and perpetual bondage. Their situation can be well compared with that of the blacks in America during slavery. Paatan, Golak's descendant, finds himself in a bewilderingly incomprehensible world of suffering while not being responsible for his suffering and not being aware of the form and shape of the agent that makes him suffer. He is, thus, in a Kafkaesque world that provides him no specific knowledge and reason for his suffering.

The continuity between the past and the present, the grip of the past over the present is dramatically presented by the fact that Golak and Paatan are played by the same actor, and Ravana, the money lender of the past and Maatang, the present day money-lender played by the same actor. That the same actress plays Gairabi Dasi and Maatang's wife, who is the present day Mistress suggests that slave-woman and the landlord's wife share the same fate of woman in a feudal patriarchal set-up. On the other hand Paatan's identification with Golak suggested by one actor playing two roles is indicative of his search for the reason for his suffering, the 'real' cause that continues to delude him. This technique of playing different roles adds to the Brechtian alienation effect already introduced through the devices of the choric role of the dhol player and of the protagonist-narrator directly addressing the audience that attempt to break the invisible fourth wall of the stage. This provides a critical perspective to the spectators to view the situation critically.

Maatang the present-day tyrant, feudal and patriarchal, represents the decadent feudalism – he is impotent, has no children and has married a woman much younger than him after his first wife died childless. His infertility is related to the famine that has turned the land barren. This implies the continuity between the internal nature and the external landscape. He has, married her by giving her father, who was a poor share-cropper in his land a share in his cropland, and by giving her jewellery. In that sense he has bought her. He has married her to have a son from her by some means or other to inherit and protect and also increase his property accumulated through usury, land grabbing and filching from government relief. He wants to use his wife as a means to his materialistic growth, as he uses money to beget more money. He tries to reduce the woman to her reproductive self. Paatan's energy and vitality runs counter to Maatang's sterility, his anti-life attitude. Paatan's expression of his desire to marry, have a family and a son of his own inflames Maatang's jealousy, makes him more aware of his own gnawing sense of impotence that he desperately tries to hide by marrying a young woman and by flaunting his authority over Paatan by beating him up. Beating is to reduce him to the body, a beast "a horse" (42) and smother his spirit that he fears. Denied freedom and sexual satisfaction in her relation with Maatang, his wife, the young mistress, longs for Paatan : "But for me it was a wedding with an old fogey" (46). She is attracted to the well-formed and able bodied young man, Paatan. As a woman and as the daughter of a poor share-cropper, she finds herself belonging to a subordinate class in relation to her husband. She feels closer to Paatan in terms of the class division and can find in him a potential ally: "Your master has made an aajir of you and of me too" (46). But in view of her present position as the

Why do you draw the dust from my courtyard for your puja. The famine and the drought come again and again. And the whore has to strip naked and call for the water to bring the rain down on you. (51)

The radical ambivalence of woman is that she is a victim as well as a life-giver as Jashoda in 'Stanyadayini' is. Punnashashi is another aajir who is made to use her naked body to entertain people and even to bring rain to the earth, that confuses the sacred and the profane. What has been considered sacred is here exposed to intensive interrogation. As Luce Irigaray suggests, a woman is divided into "two irreconcilable bodies: her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values" (180). It is her 'natural' body that Punnasashi wants to defend.

The free natural 'body is represented in the play by Gipsy women. Gipsy women, who sell "magic potion", herbal medicines, show acrobatics, brew liquor, lead nomadic life are outcastes beyond the margin of the society. Their free and open air life attracts Paatan who leads a prisoner's life. While the sexuality of Punnashashi is bound by custom and regulated by money, the sexuality of the gipsy women is that of natural body that Punnashashi longs for, that Paatan, too, longs for in his struggle to free his body from the control of the slave owner. Their possession of the magic potion indicates their possession of the secrets of the erotic power that can subjugate men, their ability to activate the erotic power, which is natural and spontaneous, to a mystical level, and their ability to participate in the vital forces of life through intuition and imagination. The magic potion stands for the folk wisdom that can be tapped to revitalize the life atrophied by elitist practices as well as materialist ideologies. It is supposed to work miracles like the paste of magic roots given to Rani in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* or the consecrate snake gourd representing the phallic God in Chandrasekhar Kamber's *Jokumar Swami*. A proper arousal, circulation and channelization of the vital energy has a miraculous effect. Maatang orders to drive gipsy women away because they, as the embodiment of life force, are a challenge to his masculine authority and his materialistic ideology that denies woman and the slave as the natural body, and also because of the economic reason that their liquor business threatens his own liquor business. Maatang, a slave-owner, land-grabber, relief-thief and liquor-dealer is identified with the commodification of all aspects of life that Paatan, Punnashashi, the gipsy woman and the Mistress oppose. The latter try to provide an alternative myth, which the mother of Cremation Ground embodies. This goddess of the marginalized stands for the celebration of the spiritually charged body, the body-mystique realized at the meeting point of the body and mortality.

The nocturnal ritual performed by Punnashashi is at the end disturbed

and subverted by Paatan, the gipsy woman and the Mistress, as Paatan elopes with the gipsy woman and is chased by the mob set after him by no other person than the Mistress herself. The chorus of the mob reminds him of his perpetual slavery, the futility of his attempt at freedom.

The world's not for you
The gipsy woman is not for you
As long as the aajir's bond's there
You're just a maimed beast
And Maatang is your God
The gipsy woman's not for you
The world's not for you
Life's not for you. (52)

This is a "no-exit" situation of the bonded labourer bound by the chains of the past and the dark uncertainty of the future. The Mistress promises him his freedom, his bond back and in exchange begs his love. He cannot think that the Mistress, who is socially and economically superior to him, can even love someone as lowly as him. He thinks she is making fun of him. Not responding to her overture, when he runs away with the gipsy woman she gets him captured and beaten up to make him submit to her love. At last she steals the bond secretly, gets him released from the imprisonment and they run away in the night. When she hands over the *gamcha* that has wrapped up the bond he finds that there is no bond, it has weathered away and has been reduced to dust. Suspecting her to have deceived him he, in despair and bewilderment, he strangles her to death. The ultimate irony is that the bond has ceased to exist and many of his ancestors had the same fate as he has. He has slaved away his days without knowing that he is really free, no bond is there to bind him and he kills the Mistress, without knowing that she really has loved him.

Like everyone else in the world I was a free man (*Standing a fact*) and I alone didn't know. (*Looks at the dead woman lying at his feet*). This luscious woman was for me, I didn't know (*Looks around*) (58).

The ending reflects the terribly disorienting effects of slavery. When Paatan realizes his mistake he calmly surrenders to the legal authority.

The play does not end with doom; it ends with an awareness of the falsity and illusion, on which a slave's life is based. Not only his life but the lives of his ancestors have been a mockery. He is confronted with what Althusser calls an "absent cause", or what Lacan terms "Real" to characterize history, represented here by the elusive non-existent bond. He is confounded by history, the history of the bonded labour, the downtrodden that reaches him in fragments through the multiple layers of textualization, (re)textualization- myths, narratives and cultural

aged, but none are to be feared for they do not know Kunti's language. She who had served the Gods, the brahmans, who had always lived in the rajavritta had never spoken to a dasi. Strangely the nishadin, "seem to be a tranquil happy, hard working lot, their faces always wreathed in bright smiles" (26). They sing their own songs and watching them Kunti realizes for the first time that she follows, "a predetermined, predestined path to death" (26). Her emaciated body subjected to a number of religious penance rituals is clad in white silk. Like Uttara she does not feel alive after the bloodbath and like Subhadra she remembers Gandhari, "cursing war and bloodshed on behalf of all the women in this world" (28). Gandhari had fearlessly held Krishna responsible for the war but both Subhadra and Kunti had remained silent. After her loud confession in the forest Kunti suddenly realizes that the nishadin stand silently before her, staring at her. But speaking aloud before them is like speaking to the rocks and stones; to the earth. They did not speak the same language and she did not know theirs so Kunti unburdens herself to Mother Earth without ever perceiving that the nishadin, children of Mother Earth herself laugh at her and pity her.

One afternoon there is panic in the forest, flocks of birds fly away, monkeys vanish and herds of cheetals flee somewhere. The nishad men, women and children also leave with their belongings but the eldest nishadin woman confronts Kunti in her own language. She addresses Kunti by name and the shocked Kunti realizes that the 'outcasts' are just as human as her; they speak the same language. Kunti feels offended at being addressed by name but remembers that she is in the forest to do penance. The nishadin states that her community had waited for years for Kunti to reach the forest for they did not ever enter the town. They had long yearned for Kunti to stand trial in the court of the earth. When Kunti says that the rishis in the forest are her defence, the nishadin is unfazed, for the native of the land can never be intimidated by the intruder. The nishadin fiercely proclaims, "This is the land of our birth, you know. Devi Aranyaka is our mother" and Kunti feels the strength drain out of her (36). John Keay states in his book, *India, a History*, "India's Aryans were therefore originally immigrants, and to judge by their exploits as recorded in the Vedas, highly combative ones. Aided and encouraged by deities like the fire breathing Agni and the thunder bolt throwing Indra, the Aryan conquistadors were seen as having hurtled down the passes from Afghanistan to career across the plains of the Punjab. Dealing death and destruction from fleets of horse-drawn chariots, they subdued the indigenous peoples and appropriated their herds. As *dasa* or *dasyu* these indigenes or aborigines were characterized as dark, flat nosed, uncouth, incomprehensible and generally inferior. The Aryans, on the other hand were finer featured, fairer, taller,

favoured above others in the excellence of their gods, their horse and their ritual magic, and altogether very superior people."(21)

The aborigine, the owner of the land, the native of the country, confronts the conquistadors with the law of the land. The nishadin accuses Kunti of having committed the most heinous sin, "But to the people of the lokavritta, to sacrifice or harm innocents in one's own self interest is the most unpardonable sin. You are guilty of that sin"(36). The regal Kunti who had made the preparations for the numerous sacred yagnas, fasted during the pujas, and borne Yudhisthira son of Dharma, the god of Death and Justice, then the invincible Bhima from the wind God and Arjuna from Indra, the God of Thunder, could not have condescended to sin against the commoner. But the nishadin insists and forces Kunti to travel back in time to the memory of a hideous truth long suppressed for the comfort of convenience. Several years earlier Kunti had cunningly broken high caste tradition to invite outcasts instead of brahmans for a lavish feast in the town of Varanavata. Kunti and the Pandavas had lived in a house of lac, Jatugriha, for one year. It lay on the edge of the town where the nishadin were regular visitors on their way back home. The nishadin supplied timber, animal hides, ivory, venison, honey, resin, medicinal herbs in return for clothes-salt-rice. Kunti alone knew of a particular elderly nishadin and her five young sons whom she had invited for a feast at which she served them enough wine to make them senselessly drunk. Then knowing full well that the house would be burnt to ashes she had left them there while she and her five sons escaped through a secret tunnel. The elderly nishadin and her five sons were the proof that Kunti had provided to show that she and her five sons had burnt to death. As the nishadin, "don't deny the demands of life", the surviving wives of the five sons remarried (38). Years later the eldest daughter–in-law of the nishadin who had perished in the fire and the other descendants confront Kunti in their own land to claim justice. According to the constructed laws of the upper caste it is not a sin to kill innocent people but Mother Nature enforces her law. A forest fire from the highly inflammable resin has arisen and the nishadin flee with their families to the mountains. The nishadin states that the three, Dhritarashtra blind from birth, Gandhari who chose to be blind and Kunti who allowed treachery and cunning to blind her, cannot reach safer places. Mother Nature, Devi Aranyaka, holds Kunti guilty and her five sons as allies, so it consumes Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti in its blazing forest fire. Nature destroys the friutless and constructs anew, so after the fire, rain will turn the earth green again. Nature exercises its power to subvert the constructed hierarchy of the law of the rajavritta over the law of the janavritta.

In one of the many questions of truth that Kunti in her agony puts to herself, she wonders aloud whether in the epic battle, dharma triumphed in vanquishing adharma. Before Krishna, Gandhari had wailed not only for her hundred dead sons but also for Draupadi's sons and for the innumerable widows. It was a war, "to wipe out the other" and declare one self as all powerful at the price of bloodshed and grief of thousands of foot soldiers families who had otherwise nothing to do with the causes of it (28). Nature obliterates the grand narrative of monarchy when it decides to speak for the rights of the commoner. History testifies to a Gangetic flood dated by archaelogists to about 800 B.C. that destroyed the town of Hastinapura after the great Bharata war. Hastinapura had become the capital of the descendants of Arjuna. Sanskrit textual tradition also has recorded the flooding when the town was under its seventh ruler since the war (4).

Souvali is the story of a dasi by the same name, who does not regard her son's biological father as her husband. When Gandhari was pregnant with her first child, a vaishya Souvali was in the service of Dhritarashtra from whom she bore a son named Yuyutsu. Souvali hates the name given by the royal family and in a fierce declaration of matriarchy names her son Souvalya. He is the first born of Dhritarashtra but his rights do not extend beyond his name for he is a dasiputra. Raised in the royal household until age five, Souvalya is then sent off to a separate gurugriha. Later when it is time for arms training Souvalya is transferred to the royal gurugriha of the Kauravas to retrieve their arrows and fetch the birds they shoot down. That is when Souvali decides to make a bold break from the rajavritta to live alone as an independent woman on the outskirts of the town. Gandhari fiercely guards Dhritarashtra so that he cannot inquire about the welfare of Souvalya and yet at the same time she remains silent when Souvali seeks her freedom. Undeterred, Souvali breaks free, for it is Duryodhana who is the loved legal heir. The head dasi Dhruva and her brother help Souvali restablish herself and keep her informed about her son. Thereafter the beautiful Souvali rejects all marriage offers from her community to nurture her bond with her son. Years of humiliation in the Kaurava household make Souvalya defect to the Pandava side at the time of the great battle, much to the contempt of Duryodhan. After the Pandava victory and Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra's death in the forest fire, Yudhisthira performs the 'mahatarpan', water being offered to the spirits of the dead. As Dhritarashtra's first born son, Souvalya who is a man of conscience and principle performs first the tarpan for his father to enable the rites to begin. Soon after that he leaves to meet his mother who holds him close to experience their bond of love. As a child Souvalya's royal siblings had taunted him for yearning for his mother. Souvali says that its only the common people who

live by their natural emotions like, "Tenderness, caring, compassion, romance, love, anger, jealousy" (47). For the rajavritta, "It's always been power, greed, arrogance and enmity that's caused their ruin"(47). After Souvalya falls asleep in peace, Souvali feasts on sweets and golden honey. It is delightful to know that while the other widowed dasis clad in white would be able to eat only the religiously prescribed austere food, she can celebrate her independence with delicious food and dress in gaily coloured garments. Souvali refuses to perform any death rites for Dhritarashtra, "What death rites? Who was Dhritarashtra to me?"(48). She rejects the patriarchally manipulated idealism of widow self-denial as virtue and declares to herself, "Today too I'll let my own dharma tell me what's right"(49). Souvalya had been foolish in trying to conform to royal norms and rituals. He does not realize that even the Pandavas whom he now serves will never integrate him as one of their own. Souvali symbolically shuts the door on society as she relishes all the delicious foods forbidden to widows. The master narratives of monarchy, patriarchy and dogma collapse as Souvali delightfully declares to herself, "I'm a free woman," as "It feels good to have defied the dead Dhritarashtra" (49,48).

After Kurukshetra is a gynotext, narratives of the colonized subaltern that 'write back' to superimpose and obliterate the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, monarchy, dogma and class division. It presents a multiplicity of discourses whereby marginality and perpetrated 'otherness' are sources of energy and potential change. All the three stories are anti-establishment in which the women chart their own destinies of individual freedom by celebrating all forms of difference. They establish what Patricia Waugh states, in her essay "Postmodernism and Feminism", "that gender is not a consequence of anatomy and that social institutions do not reflect universal truths about human nature"(346). The stories articulate ancient voices of women who declare that all knowledge is constructed on the basis of relations of power and must be contested from the personal sphere towards the social, politically, to establish an autonomous domain. David Ludden's book *Reading Subaltern Studies, Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* provides a reference guide for reading Ranjit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* in a world context. Ludden refers to Guha's focus, "on the subaltern, the *autonomous* domain of the people, to demonstrate they had their own consciousness, their own politics of resistance, their own mobilizations and their own ideologies of opposition"(192). *After Kurukshetra* testifies that this autonomous domain did exist.

husbands. The word "signifies" is a concept developed by the African-American literary theorist and critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. and implies developing an alternative aesthetics or culture through commenting or "signifyin(g) on the dominant culture.[5]

By placing a tribal woman who is a Naxalite activist center stage, and casting her in a role that is both traditional and revolutionary, Mahasweta Devi is not only rewriting some dimensions of the epic from the standpoint of gender, but also from the standpoint of history and myth. *Draupadi* is a type of revisionist historiography that like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* performs a double task of cultural reclamation by foregrounding both gender and race, in representing the occluded, elided over subjects of history. Subalternizing history is part of Mahasweta's aesthetic and narrative practice, the novel *Aranyer Adhikar* or *Right to the Forest*, addressing a lacuna in mainstream historiography about the Munda insurrections in 1890. In *Draupadi* Mahasweta Devi makes race, class and gender "signify" in a way, that a tribal woman whose race, gender and class had not met with much representation in mainstream writing or discourse, becomes not only the seminal focus of a story, but also of history, and signifies again, on the personality of the mythical/historical Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. New models of womanhood emerge, as a complex dialogue with Aryan traditions is engendered, the Draupadi/Dopdi of the protagonist's name suggesting the simultaneity of the epic and the indigenous tribal and the mutual qualification of both by the other.

In an interview with Gayatri Spivak published in the book *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta declares,

> Remember, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is a black woman. She must have been a tribal. In the State of Himachal Pradesh we still find the sort of fraternal polyandry that Draupadi was supposed to have practiced in the *Mahabharata*. The polyandrous tribal women of Himachal Pradesh are said to belong to the Draupadi Gotra or clan." (i)

Mahasweta's stance as revisionist historiographer is clear in the above statement. Not only is she implying the continuous history of the tribal people in India, but recasting the Aryan Draupadi as a tribal woman, and in this text highlighting the Naxalite movement through the agency of a woman. If naming is the prerogative of those in power then the text witnesses the operation of power at two levels—on the part of Surya Sahu's wife, whose husband owned Draupadi's mother as indentured labourer, and on the part of Mahasweta. Mahasweta creates alternative genealogies of culture by imparting a mythical status to a tribal woman by conferring on her the name of the lead woman protagonist in the *Mahabharata*.

This too is a story centered on land like the *Mahabharata*. However, this is a moment of contemporary history, an attempt at revolution by an extreme wing of the Left, and eventually ruthlessly quelled by the Centre. In the late 1960's, a peasant revolution broke out in the Naxalbari area of the Darjeeling district in West Bengal, where efforts had been going on since the 1950's by communists to organize sharecroppers and tea labour against the oppressive tenancy practices of jotedars and landlords. Most of these landless labourers belonged to the tribal Santhal, Rajbanshi and Oraon communities. When the first United front non-Congress government was sworn in on March 2, 1967 in West Bengal, comprising the C.P.I. , the C.P.M and the Bangla Congress, promises for an equitable distribution of land were made. Tardiness in the delivery of such promises sparked a revolutionary outburst in Naxalbari, and then the movement spread to other states like Bihar, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. Historians Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee describe the Naxalite movement as,

> A widespread "land grab" movement by the landless in many parts of the country under the leadership of the Communist and Socialist parties. . . . the total amount of land seized was not very significant and most of it was government wasteland. . . . The movement was effectively suppressed. However,. . . on the whole the movement had a significant symbolic effect. The nation's attention was drawn dramatically to the agrarian question. (*India After Independence*, 388-389)

It is against this backdrop that Draupadi enters the stage in the story, at a moment of crisis in revolution. The movement is in its last phases. The government has succeeded in capturing many peasant activists. Draupadi's husband and fellow comrade, Dulna, has been brutally killed at a moment when he lay on his stomach on a "flat stone, dipping his face to drink water" (189). Either it is the narrator's voice, or Dopdi's own voice, that informs us that "Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood." (190)

However, this woman of epic energies and epic resolve now faces the hydra-headed and immensely powerful antagonist alone in the jungle space. The army reports type her as "most notorious" (187) and "long wanted." (187) who with her husband was responsible for the murder of Surya Sahu (landowner) and his son, who polluted upper caste wells and did not "surrender" three young men wanted by the government (187). I have said earlier, that Mahasweta's text signifies on the ancient *Mahabharata*, and instead of Aryan customs and rituals providing the cultural framework within which the story is enacted, we have the tribal. Instead of conch shells summoning the warriors to battle, we are told of a black skinned couple "ululating like police sirens before the episode" (188) and singing

jubilantly before any action in a tongue whose meaning the text tells us was undecipherable even to Santhals (188). The war song sounded like:

Samary hijulenako mar goekope (189).

Some of the meaning of the text stems from the efforts made by government officials to decipher the meaning of the tribal language, which retains it ambiguity to the very end. When Dulna utters the words "Ma-Ho" before he dies. Senanayak has experts from Calcutta brought in to decode the meaning of his words. On a theoretical level, the fact that the language remains undecipherable could imply the failure of discursive practices and the failure of those with intellectual/economic/political power to know and thereby have power over, the object of knowledge. The Santhal or the tribal thus acquires a threatening dimension in the social, economic and political body of the state, and this becomes another instance of the text signifying(g) on the Aryan heritage of Indian culture. It is a tribal language, not Sanskrit that presents the challenge to the dominant order. Practitioners of theory are problematized in this text with theoreticians qua intellectuals coming out in a poor light compared to those who really give their life for the cause of the movement like Dulna and Dopdi.

Dopdi's principal combatant in this story is Senanayak whose name means head of the soldiers, and thus the name fulfils a symbolic function in the mythical economy of the text. Mahasweta might be working within the realist mode of fiction, but the mythical mode allows her to essentialize attributes in characters, thereby creating an atmosphere of epic combat between a woman, who is a tribal and a radical left wing revolutionary, and on the other hand, a deracinated intellectual representing institutional power. Perhaps, the text also stages through Draupadi and Senanayak, the dramatic confrontation of tribal vitality and feminine vitality vis a vis the ageing traditions of the dominant political and cultural order of India. The end of the text quite fittingly witnesses the unmanning of Senanayak by Draupadi. Senanyak is introduced by the narrator as the "elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics" who believes in the dictum from the Army Handbook that he always refers to that " In order to destroy the enemy, become one." (188). In lines rich with irony, the narrator describes him as someone who is "getting rid of the young by means of "apprehension and elimination," (189) but at the same time like Shakespeare he believes in "delivering the world's legacy into youth's hands. He is Prospero as well" (189). The implication in these lines is this that someone like Senanayak is counter revolution , cannot truly have the well being of the young in mind.

Gayatri Spivak in her translator's preface to the story describes

Senanayak as a "pluralist aesthete" who identifies in "theory" with the enemy but not in "practice." (179) Spivak's contention in this regard, with possible referencing of herself is that "pluralist aesthetes of the first world are willy nilly participants in the production of an exploitative society." (179). This is certainly true I feel of Spivak's own appropriating gestures of theorizing Mahasweta's story which only a first world theory initiated audience will key into, but without question, the role of the intellectual in this story is extremely problematic. Within the symbolic economy of the story where a gulf between action and intellection exists, those who act inspite of the possibility of failure, carry the force of the narrative with them. Dopdi and Dulna constitute this powerful center in the story. Their mastery in combat is beyond question, and here too the narrator reinforces the idea of how action empowers:

> Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow, etc. In fact, their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. . . . But since Dulna and Dopdi are illiterate, their kind have practiced the use of weapons generation after generation (188).

We notice the ironical inflection in the word *illiterate*, which poses the question of tribal military efficiency vis a vis the machine generated power of the Indian army. It is significant that Arjan Singh who first led the government troops against the revolutionaries is terrified of Dopdi and Dulna.

In fact, the intellectual comrades of Dopdi, who constitute the educated section of the revolutionaries, are also an absence in the story. We only hear references to Arijit, Malini, Shamu and Mantu, but we never see them, and although we hear Arijit's instructions echoing in Draupadi's mind as she runs through the jungle space alone, he/they fail to appear when Draupadi is apprehended. Their stance is,

> If Comrade Dopdi arrives late, we will not remain. There will be a sign of where we've gone. No comrade will allow the others to be destroyed for her own sake. (194)

In the character of Draupadi Mahasweta Devi perhaps creates a powerful model of indigenous feminism, in having Draupadi perform actions through intellectual conviction (that land should be redistributed among its original cultivators), and also demonstrate a capacity for unselfish love and consideration. That Draupadi loved her husband is beyond question, she is also quite maternal towards Arijit and the others. Thus the character of Draupadi takes on aspects of virtues or qualities that one traditionally associates with womanhood in India. Her actions are for the collective good, not for individual advancement. She does not strive for self-definition with a purpose, she is spontaneously a woman of action. As if to build her

epic stature the narrator of Dopdi's own voice informs us,

> Dopdi's blood was the pure unadulterated black blood of Champbhumi. From Champa to Bakuli, the rise and set of a million moons. . . .Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women's blood in black armour. (193).

This tribal woman, magnificent as any epic hero, whose actions are the output of ceaseless planning, whose powers of endurance are of almost mythical proportions, is determined that if apprehended the government will not learn about Arijit and the other's whereabouts from her:

> Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. I mind an body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue (192).

Eventually, she is captured or apprehended. Senanayak's instructions to his men at the moment of her apprehension is

> Make her. Do the needful (195).

Parallel to the incident of the disrobing or attempted disrobing of Draupadi's body in the *Mahabharata*, Dopdi Mehjen now becomes the object of multiple rape. It is at this moment I feel that the text transcends its specific cultural boundaries and becomes a testament to woman's primary biological, anatomical, social and cultural significance—that she is a body. The narrator describes the event:

> Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years....slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under ass and waist. Her own blood. . . . Incredible thirst. In case she says water she catches her lower lip in her teeth. . . . How many came to make her? (195)
>
> ...Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it (195).

Having been reminded of her physical identity so forcibly, she performs the final act of subversion that almost unmans Senanayak. Draupadi's act is an interrogation of all that culture and power stand for, and becomes a forcible reminder of the fact that for the gendered subaltern her only instrument of retaliation against the powers that oppress her, is her body. In *Beloved*, Morrison stages such an act of subversion when she has Sethe kill her two-year old child, because she wished to prevent the latter's return to slavery.[6]

When Draupadi is summoned to the Burra Sahib's tent, she stands up and tears off the flimsy piece of cloth covering her. She walks up to senanayak and confronts him naked. The narrator describes the moment:

> Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanyak simply cannot understand. 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, and sharp as her ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (196)

The story ends with these lines,

> Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (196)

It is interesting ot note that at the end of the story Mahasweta does not use the tribal name Dopdi anymore; she is consistent in her use of the epic name Draupadi. In the concluding moments of the story, one feels that not only does Mahasweta's story signify or offer an alternative cultural reading to the *Mahabharata*, or the character of Draupadi in it, but finally also claims the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. The issues of power, subordination and gender merge into each other in both texts to suggest paradigmatic histories of gender. A central paradigm is the question of the inevitability of woman's destiny in her body.

If the creation of alternative myths is Mahasweta's task in these texts, then the body of the subaltern woman emerges as the primary determinant of her destiny. Yet, by linking the tribal Dopdi with the aristocratic Draupadi, Mahasweta implies a continuity of woman's history that is lived through the body. Therefore the arena where gender, history and myth coalesce, is in the arena of the body. Mahasweta seems to imply that for women history is not only lived through the body but also created through it. Where Draupadi failed with her hatchet and scythe, she succeeded with her body. Like the tribal language that unnerves Arjan Singh, the leader of the government troops, Draupadi's nakedness uproots Senanayak from all the consolations and guarantees of culture, learning and power that gave his existence its value and meaning. In contrast to the legendary Draupadi who had striven to keep clothing on her, the tribal Dopdi inscribes tribal identity, revolution and subversive gender norms through her act of unclothing herself. Like the Medusa[6] whose laughter mocks at social customs, Dopdi/Draupadi's laughter becomes an uncontested act of self-assertion and self claiming

Notes

1. *Draupadi* and *Stanadayini* were translated by Gayatri Spivak in the years 1981 and 1987, respectively, and first published in the translated form in *In*

Dismantling Theory? Agency and the Subaltern Women in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

Dinithy Karunanayake

The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[1]

Thus asserts Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" According to the general thrust of Spivak's argument in this essay, her final assertion that the "subaltern cannot speak" denies the gendered subaltern the ability to represent herself and achieve voice agency. Spivak's contention that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" also precludes the possibility of others re-presenting the subaltern woman save as a blank or empty space. Hence the "circumscribed task" Spivak envisions for the female intellectual is to merely foreground the "space" or "absence" that according to Spivak, is the subaltern woman in discourse—Colonial, Western or Native Elite. This presentation of the gendered subaltern as completely inaccessible, and more crucially, incapable of agency or resistance leads to a problematic conclusion: [colonialism in collusion with (native) patriarchy affected a complete "erasure" of the (subaltern) woman.] This is however a clearly untenable proposition (Mani: 1999 403). The 1889 description of the plight of the Hindu widow written by a widow and a potential sati herself, Ania Loomba points out, is testimony to the fact that subaltern women, such as the figure of sati that Spivak alludes to, did in fact "speak" (237).

The depiction of the gendered subaltern as "an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness" (Moore Gilbert: 1997 102) is problematic on several counts. As Bart Moore Gilbert demonstrates "the more the subaltern is seen

as *wholly* other, the more Spivak seems to construct the subaltern's identity neither relationally nor diferentially, but in essentialist terms" (102). Ironically, through this representation she replicates a failure of the Subaltern Studies Scholars for which she critiqued them: the failure to consider the subaltern in relation to the other social groups around them. Further, Spivak's presentation of the gendered subaltern creates a complete victim and in turn makes the oppressor an all-powerful force. A conception of the subaltern woman as "an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness," also implies a notion of identity as fixed and unchangeable.[2]

The text that I have chosen for analysis, Mahasweta Devi's revisionary feminist short story "Draupadi," captures the experiences of a subaltern woman within the context of the historical juncture of the "interregnum."[3] The central character Draupadi or Dopdi, as she is often referred to in the text, is involved in a revolutionary movement—the Naxalite movement in India. While Dopdi is presented as a strong woman from the outset, it is at the very moment that she should become the "silenced victim" according to traditional schema that she instead emerges as an agent. In this essay I will discuss the way in which this re-presentation of "coming to agency" constitutes a dismantling of the subaltern theory propounded by Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Transgression, Agency and the Interregnum

(In the interregnum between the state as they know it and the anticipated state they struggle for," states Neloufer de Mel, "normalcy is suspended and prevailing rules do not apply. This state of emergency encourages transgression." (18). As pointed out by her, the suspension of normalcy in a conflict situation, for instance, a resistance movement struggling for social justice as in the case of the Naxalite movement in "Draupadi," promotes transgressions as the prevailing norms and rules no longer pertain. Such "transgressive" moments according to de Mel, often result in a re-invention of tradition and a re-inscription of the ascribed social roles, particularly of women. These transformations could then result in women's agency and empowerment.) It is therefore important to examine the short story in the light of these assertions in order to ascertain how they impact on the re-presentation of the subaltern woman as an agent in the text.

In "Draupadi," when we first encounter the protagonist Dopdi, she is living in the Jharkhani forest with a group of Naxalite rebels referred to as the "young gentlemen." The fact that such behaviour is not unorthodox for a woman of the Santhal tribe is brought to light when Dopdi harkens back to times past with nostalgia and adoration: "Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood

guard over their women's blood in black armor." (193). The question then is, does she emerge as an agent? In order to answer this query an examination of Dopdi's role in the movement is important.

The crucial role Dopdi plays in the movement is first brought out through the "official reports." "In the first phase of the confrontation the fugitives, ignorant of the forest's topography, are caught easily" (190) we are told. All this however changes in the next phase for, according to the report, "they do not allow themselves to be captured in combat [. . .] Now it seems that they have found a trustworthy courier. Ten to one it's Dopdi" (190). Hence, Dopdi seems of vital importance to the movement. It is Dopdi who goes in to the village in search of food (191) and to "spy" on the activities of the police. For instance, "Dopdi has seen the new camp, she has sat in the *bus station* and passed the time of day, smoked a 'bidi' and found out how many *police convoys* had arrived, how many radio vans [...]" (194). Blending in to the daily activities of the village, she is able to gather information about the new camp set up in the village, about the two hundred-rupee price on her head (191) and the preparations made to capture hers and the other Naxalite insurgents. Further, as Dulna and Dopdi had "worked at the house of virtually every landowner, they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets [. ...]" (189). In the "expert opinion" of Senanayak and the *Army Handbook*, the insurgents have become a force to reckon with only through their involvement with Dopdi and her fellow tribals. This is amply illustrated when the superior "fighting power" of Dopdi and Dulna is analysed as follows:

> [. . .] the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. [. . .] Dopdi and Dulna belong to the *category* of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow [...] their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. Not all gentlemen become experts in the explosion of 'chambers'; they think the power will come out of its own if the gun is held. But since Dulna and Dopdi are illiterate, their kind have practiced the use of weapons generation after generation. (188)

While there is a certain amount of condescension in the way in which the superior fighting power of the two tribals is accounted for, there is also a healthy regard for their capabilities as combatants. Therefore, Senanayak's philosophy is to respect the opposition in *theory* what ever his *practice* may be (189).[4] The respect and regard Senanayak has for Dopdi's capabilities is justified when considering the manner in which she destroys Dukhiram, the soldiers' jungle scout and the man she holds responsible for Dulna's death (190). Moreover, Dopdi herself is aware of this difference between her and the "gentlemen" and views it as strength. For instance, when contemplating

the way in which she should handle the policeman following her, she thinks of the "baby scythe" in her hand that so effectively killed Dukhiram and thinks "Thank God [she] is not a gentleman" for she knows that the "gentlemen" cannot have handled such a situation as efficiently and effectively as she can (190). Does this then mean that Dopdi emerges as an "agent"?

The answer to the question posed above lies in the following extract form the Stree Shakti Sanghatana recording of the experiences of women in the Telengana People's Struggle. According to them, the type of "contributory" historiography seen in the above analysis where women's participation in militant groups is "analysed and judged not according to their value or importance for women, but according to their 'use' for the movement in question" devalues the complex issues surrounding the female combatant (quoted in de Mel , 229).Thus if Mahasweta Devi had limited herself to such a re-presentation of the subaltern woman's role in the resistance movement, the subaltern woman would not have emerged as an agent. The word "agent" is associated with notions of free will and of exerting power and authority. An assessment of Dopdi's role in the resistance movement however reveals that although her contribution was crucial to the "success" of the movement, she is not in a position to "exert power and authority." Her actions are governed by the instructions she receives from Arijit and she models her behaviour on and adheres faithfully to the traditions of the Santals handed down to her by her forefathers. She and Dulna initially join the movement more because circumstances force them to than through personal convictions and an ideological allegiance to its cause. As she mentally prepares herself for the confrontation with the policeman who is following her, she keeps recalling the instructions and pointers she has received from Arijit and the other "gentlemen." It is Arijit's voice that acts as a guide and dictates her actions through out the sequence where she deliberately leads the policeman astray. Thus, "Arijit's voice. If anyone is caught, the others must catch the *timing* and *change* their *hideout*. If *comrade* Dopdi arrives late, we will not remain. There will be a sign of where we are gone. No *comrade* will let the others be destroyed for her own sake" (Italics in original, 194). It is with these instructions in mind that Dopdi resolves to lead the policeman to the "burning ghat"—as far away from the forest and their hideout as possible. Thus as Spivak points out, the decision makers are the educated, bourgeois young men and women who have "*orient*[*ed*] their book learning to the soil they live on" (191). These, according to the erudite Senanayak, are the "cause of fear" (191). Apart from her loyalty to the movement and its leaders, Dopdi also remains faithful to the codes of conduct instilled in her through her tribal upbringing. She thus draws on and wishes to emulate Dulna's actions: "Dulna died, but, let me tell you, he

didn't lose anyone else's life. Because this was not in our heads to begin with" (194). The reason why this was never in their heads is that they still remain faithful to the traditions handed down to them by their forefathers for, "crow would eat crows flesh before Santal would betray Santal" (193). These factors according to Spivak make Dopdi a historically plausible character. Unfortunately however, it is these very loyalties that enable Senanayak to predict her behaviour and in the end apprehend her. Thus within this context, although Dopdi is a strong, resilient female character, transgressing the gender and cultural norms of her society, she does not appear to be an "agent" as yet.

Agency After Rape?

At a glance, there appears to be little connection between the words "agency" and "rape" save perhaps as antonyms. Where women are concerned, rape, with its connotations of violation, imposition of force, destructive violence perpetrated on the body and the psyche, is more commonly aligned with the status "victim." Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in her analysis of narratives with rape as a central theme states that the texts of male writers like Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and E.M Forster's *A Passage to India*, result in either the death of the raped woman as is the case in *Clarissa* or her "disappearance" as happens in *A Passage to India*.[5] Thus *life* after rape is itself a unique feature of feminist fiction.[6] Sunder Rajan sees two marked differences in the presentation of rape in the two male-authored texts and the feminist texts discussed by her. The structural location of the rape, she maintains, is significant. Thus, in the three feminist texts the rape scene occurs at the beginning of the narrative and on the one hand pre-empts expectations of its later occurrence and on the other it is granted a purely functional purpose and narrative interest is placed instead on what follows rather than on the rape. Both strategies effectively diminish rape. In contrast, both Richardson and Forster place the scene of rape at the centre of their narratives 'so that the plots describe a graph of climax and anticlimax around that point. Although rape is thus placed at the centre of the narrative, neither novel actually presents the scene of rape. This absence results in a blurring of events, which gives *A Passage to India* its "mystique." In *Clarissa*, the device "absolves" both parties from the implications of rape for neither Clarissa nor Lovelace is properly conscious at the time. Further, this "absence" also results in rape being treated as a "female fiction" or "fabrication" and consequentially doubts are cast on the credibility of the women's testimonies (71-74). A further problem in literary representations of rape is that there is always the danger of replicating the act in the narrative.[7] Sunder Rajan's analysis of the scenes of rape, their positioning and their narrative implications are useful for an examination of the scenes of rape in "Draupadi" and its significance for the question of "agency."

In "Draupadi" the "scene" of rape is presented but not in a voyeuristic mode but from the point of view of the woman who was raped. Thus, after Senanayak leaves Dopdi following his unsuccessful "questioning session," with "Make her. *Do the needful*," (195) the narrative re-enacts Dopdi's consciousness and loss of consciousness, opening and closing of eyes. Thus, the first rape sequence is not actually presented as Dopdi loses consciousness. It is rather Dopdi's feelings that are offered. "Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moon light she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she had been made up right' (195). There is however no room for doubt. The brutality of the rape is brought out in its stark reality through these "impressions." Since Dopdi regains consciousness after this, the second rape sequence is actually presented but it effectively avoids voyeurism. Sunder Rajan asserts that where rape takes place is also significant. In *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India*, for instance, rape is enacted in private spaces (Clarissa's bed chamber and the Malabar caves respectively), followed by a re-emergence of the raped woman in to the public eye (the "long and elaborate public spectacle of Clarissa's death' and the 'public trial of Aziz, which is equally [. . .] the trial of Adela"). "The Succession of private ordeal by public display" sates Sunder Rajan, "could not be more pronounced and [. . .] more traumatic" (76). In stark contrast to these fictional re-presentations, Mahasweta Devi in her depiction blurs and merges the lines between public and private. The private pain of Dopdi's rape and the "private" perversions of the police offices[8] are enacted in the very public space of the police camp. Thus, the private becomes the public and the political.

Unlike in the three women's texts discussed by Sunder Rajan,[9] the scene of rape in "Draupadi" occurs at the end of the short story. However, instead of building up to it as a kind of climax, it proves to be a "beginning."[10] Thus, while the apprehension of Dopdi is viewed as her end "Dopdi Mejhen is about to be *apprehended*. Will be destroyed," (194) there is a sudden metamorphosis in Dopdi. Until this moment, when "she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman*," she remains faithful to the patriarchal (moral) code of her tribe handed down to her by her forefathers and, as Spivak points out, to the Naxalite movement as an act of faith toward Dulna.[11] The voice of male authority also dictates how she should respond to the police questioning and torture. Thus, "Dopdi knows, has learned by *hearing* (italics mine) so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it". (192). Dopdi's training has taught her to sacrifice herself for the cause. Her standards of conduct are governed by the old code of the Santal tribe and that code dictates that one must never betray the members

of one's tribe. Dopdi's current "tribe" consists also of her comrades in arms. Thus when she is captured and first questioned and later raped and tortured she remains passive-resisting, still holding on to the (patriarchal) traditions that inscribed her and the instructions imbibed through repeated listening. Although she has heard what it is to be tortured, —"when they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound"—in the final scene she realises that the experiences she went through are those uniquely female ones and it is at this point that Dopdi/Draupadi metamorphoses into a powerful agent.

To understand her transformation, it is important to go back to Dopdi's plan to kill the policeman who follows her. At this point when she knew that she was in danger of being captured she thinks, "This area is quiet enough. It's like a maze. [. . .] Dopdi will lead the cop to the burning 'ghat'. Patitpaban of Saranda had been sacrificed in the name of Kali of the Burning Ghats" (194). Thus, when Dopdi needs to call upon her own strength, and interestingly, there are no "instructions" from the voice of male authority she can follow, she thinks of Kali.[12] In the last sequence of events when she enters what Spivak calls the "area of lunar flux and sexual difference" (TP, 184) she realises that responding to these experiences calls for a reinscription of her identity—an identity that she had retained, as a loyal and loving wife like the mythical Draupadi and a pure blooded Santhal, even during her time in the forest when there was a transgression of gender and social codes. Thus when in the morning she is asked to come to Senanayak's tent for further questioning, Dopdi/Draupadi refuses to wash herself and thereby erase the signs of the night's brutality nor would she allow the policemen to clothe her. She challenges them with "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? [. . .] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed" (196). Here she challenges and derides their "masculinity." This is a reworking of the scene of humiliation in the *Mahabharata* where the mythical Draupadi was "saved" from the humiliating experience of being stripped, through divine intervention. Dopdi/Draupadi re-writes this script. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, "Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, her tortures intimidate her, or her rape diminish her."[13] But, Sunder Rajan cautions, this should not be read as a "transcendence of suffering, or even simply as heroism" ("Story," 352). It is instead she states, "simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy" ("Story," 352-3). By thus refusing to share the sign system, she

also becomes unpredictable. This is significant for her emergence as an agent because, for the first time, Senanayak with all his theoretical knowledge of the tribals, even about information storage in their brain cells, fails to anticipate her moves. The refusal to share the sign system also involves the articulation of an alternative identity. Thus, the Draupadi identity that she has been saddled with due to the name given to her by Surja Sahu's wife in what Spivak calls the "usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor's wife toward the tribal bond servant" (TP, 183) is replaced with one based on the Goddess Kali. The fact that Dopdi models herself on Kali is significant for Kali symbolises female power. Significantly therefore, the description of Dopdi/Draupadi in the last scene is very similar to traditional depictions of Kali.[14] "Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes her blood on her palm" and issues a challenge to Senanayak and his armed force "I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on *counter* me" (196). This last metamorphosis baffles even the all-knowing Senanayak and "for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (196).

The reversal of traditional gender and authority roles is complete. Senanayak and the army, the dominant males, the tormentors and authority figures, now "stand before" Dopdi as though before an almighty and powerful goddess. Her refusal and indeed her challenge to the men "to put [her] cloth on" is a powerful refusal to revert to the accepted status quo and to hide or blur her new identity as a primeval female force. For, unlike Draupadi of the Mahabharata, Dopdi cannot escape her fate through divine intervention. But something much more dramatic happens. She survives the ordeal triumphantly and is thereby empowered to "become" the goddess. Her tormentors are now "terribly afraid."

In the analysis of Mahasweta Devi's re-presentation of Dopdi as an agent, several significant factors about agency, the subaltern woman and the "interregnum" period emerge. The interregnum period, also a period of rebellion encourages a reconstitution of gender as well as caste, class and cultural identities and a transgression of existing norms, values and codes of conduct. Such a period can and does have a powerful impact on women. However, where the re-presentation of subaltern women in such "moments" as agents is concerned, it is not merely sufficient to place the subaltern woman character within the context of such an interregnum period and in the guise of a militant. This will not always result in the empowerment of the subaltern as female as we saw in the first part of this essay. It is rather when the personal is inextricably mixed with the political, as was the case with Dopdi at the end of the short story, that she becomes an agent through

a dramatic re-articulation of her identity. Such a refashioning of identity requires a definition of identity as not immutable and fixed but as something that is contingent and variable.[15] Thus, the crucial factor in the transformation of Dopdi into an agent is her coming to terms with the fact that contingencies, such as the ones that she is faced with, call for a radical departure from the identity fashioned and inscribed by patriarchy and (male) authority and the appropriation of a powerful female identity.

The re-presentation of Dopdi proves two undeniable facts: the subaltern woman can be re-presented in imaginative writing and she can be re-presented as an "agent." In this sense Mahasweta Devi's short story effectively dismantles Spivak's contention in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" that the "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (CSS, 104). In Dopdi, we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks loudly—literally and metaphorically for, her 'voice [. . .] is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation' (196)—and makes herself heard.

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, "Can the subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader.* Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. 104. CSS hereafter.
2. Interestingly however, Spivak's views on subaltern agency change quite significantly in her later work. Thus in her essay "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text From the Third World" she remarks on the possibility of *representing* the subaltern. In a similar vein in her "More on Power and Knowledge" she asserts that the "space Mahasweta's fiction inhabits is rather special" as "it is the space of the subaltern." Thus my proposition that the subaltern woman can be given a "voice" within imaginative writing contests Spivak's conclusion in "Can the Subaltern Speak" but appears to be in alignment with her later work. Bart Moore Gilbert however points out what appears to be a contradiction in Spivak's stance with regard to the subaltern's ability to "speak": while Spivak has forbidden the inclusion of CSS in *The Spivak Reader* on the grounds that it will be revisioned, she has also declared that the conclusion will remain substantially unchanged.
3. Neloufer de Mel in her *Women and the Nation's Narrative Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientist's Association, 2001) identifies the significance of the moment in history she identifies as the interregnum: "A society in transition, particularly at moments of struggle over colonial rule or political or cultural representation in the post-independence nation state, is inevitably in a state of emergency. Its revolutionary language, hegemonic anticipations, shifting constructions of ethnic, class, caste and cultural economics, the state's counter-moves [. . .] make it a state of contestation [. . .] such an interregnum in which normalcy is suspended has a particular bearing on women" (12-13).

4. Here I paraphrase the narrator's description of Senanayak and his attitude towards the opposition. I therefore retained the italics present in the original text.
5. Sunder Rajan states that Clarissa's cry "I am but a cipher," expresses a raped woman's perception of a total annihilation of self following upon the physical subjugation, coercion of will and psychological humiliation that she has been subjected to. (Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, 71).
6. Sunder Rajan refers to Alice Walker's *Color Purple* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as novels that defy this common model for in these texts the raped women are able to fashion a "self" after the rape (74).
7. Sunder Rajan points to the "The structuring of private and public fictional spaces: the intrusive, voyeuristic aspect of novel reading; the pleasure of mastery and possession over the 'passive' text in reading; narrative's very trajectory, its movement toward closure which traverses the feminine as object, obstacle or space[. . .]" as features in narativity that pose the danger of replicating the act in the narrative. According to her these are the "inscriptions of desire/guilt in narrativity that itself which are negotiated in a feminist reconstitution of the female subject of rape" (76).
8. The fact that the policemen prefer to keep their acts of brutality "private" and secret comes out at various points in the narrative. One clear pointer to the fact is that they wish to wash and clothe Dopdi before she is taken for further questioning in the morning.
9. Alice Walker's *Colour Purple*, Maya Angelou's *I know why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Anuradha Ramanan's "Prison."
10. Sundar Rajan makes a similar observation about *Color Purple* and *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* where the "development of the female subjects' 'self' begins after the rape and occupies the entire length of the narrative" (73).
11. Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in her *Other Worlds Essays in Cultural Politics.* New York and London: Routledge, 1980. 184. TP hereafter.
12. The invocation of Kali at this point is particularly apt as Kali is a goddess of the alternative pantheon of Hindu gods and, according to David Kinsley, tribal and low-caste people worship her (Kinsley, 116-8).
13. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing," in *Signposts Gender Issues in Post-Independence* India, ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), 352. "Story" hereafter.
14. Kali is "depicted variously with long ragged locks, fang like teeth [. . .] lips smeared or dripping with blood, claw like hands with long nails [. . .] often half naked with black skin." (*The Encyclopaedia of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*).
15. Lata Mani's concept of the "multiple articulations" of identity is a useful tool of analysis in this respect. Carol Boyce Davis's concept of the "Migratory Subjectivity" to suggest both the fluidity and agency of (black) femininity is also useful (Mani, "Cultural Theory"; Boyce Davis, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*).

Works Cited

'A Tale of two Naxalites: a cup of tea with two revolutionaries who were a thorn in the side of both landowners and the Communist Party.'