

## **The Politics of Translating: UpiMejhen and the Cryptic of ‘Dopdi’**

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**Abstract:** This paper interrogates the cultural nuances of naming the central character as Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi’s story, “Draupadi”. Draupadi is a very culturally connotative and loaded name which has a whole lot of collective conscious history of a culture associated with it. The paper poses a crucial question: why did Mahasweta Devi choose to draw from the dominant Hindu text when she was writing about tribals? Does she deliberately re-write this episode with a political agenda? Upi in her inability to be co-opted into the dominant metanarrative stands apart with her historical-political specificity as a tribal. Is Dopdi a construct in translation by Mahasweta Devi to topple, depose and question the prevailing order for women who become victims of forced invasion? Mahasweta Devi deliberately draws on literature as a political tool and puts this tribal woman to question the ‘normative’ and mainstream discourse of morality. Referring to the same text this paper would also shed light on the politics of inclusion/exclusion in translation and comparative literature.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, politics of inclusion and exclusion.

Names are a telling point in a text, they are instruments of memory and thematically very relevant. My paper revolves around the choice of the name Draupadi by Mahasweta Devi. Why did she choose to call a tribal by that name? Draupadi is a very culturally connotative and loaded name which has a whole lot of collective conscious history of a culture associated with it. A reader is bound to intuitively respond to it. The broad framework or schema of knowledge operates at all levels and affects our reading. The thesis of my paper revolves around the question as to why Mahasweta Devi chose to draw from the dominant Hindu text when she was writing about tribals. Does she deliberately re-write this episode with a political agenda? Upi in her inability to be co-opted into the dominant metanarrative stands apart with her historical-political specificity as a tribal. Is Dopdi a construct in translation by Mahasweta Devi to topple, depose and question the ways of prevailing order for women who become victims of forced invasion? Upi chooses to transgress the limits of honor by defining for herself a morality which is unprecedented. Does Mahasweta Devi deliberately draw on literature as a political tool for her interventions and hence makes this tribal woman, who is the most distant from the main stream, question the given framework of morality? Before setting out to find answers to these questions I would draw your attention to the fact that I have chosen to extend the term translation which is used in the narrow sense of a textual scripted text to a process whereby a culture other than one’s own is translated in a target scripted language. Here I am referring to Mahasweta Devi’s Bengali short stories and interventionist journalism with a long commitment to the tribals; I am treating her interventions as translations and Spivak’s retranslation or ‘transcreations’ with a political

agenda. Referring to the same text I would also discuss the politics of inclusion/exclusion in translation.

MahaswetaDevi has used her writings to render the plight of the tribal population invisible to Indian mainstream. She has explored in her fiction the history of Santhals, Hos, Oraons, Kurunis, Mundas and other tribal communities. Since 1976, she has been actively involved in the struggles of tribal and underprivileged communities in the border areas of the three adjacent provinces of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, especially in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Medinipur, Purulia, and Singhbhum.

Though, all human translations, interventions or interfaces are not politically motivated, a pattern of complicity is encountered in the three 'Breast Stories' by Mahasweta Devi. They share a pattern in the names of the protagonist; Dopdi, in 'Draupadi'; Jashoda, in 'Breast Giver' and Gangor, 'Behind the Bodice'. All the names have been drawn from the Hindu Mythology. Spivak herself admits, 'The ancient Draupadi is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the cultural credentials of the so called Aryan Civilization of India. The tribes pre-date the Aryan civilization of India. They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names' (Spivak 10). What is then the motive behind Mahasweta Devi's act of translating a tribal into Draupadi?

Sometimes the overture of the translator or recreator problematizes the source text in the most unexpected ways. In the process of reaching out to the 'other' there is a kind of co-opting into one's own by the writer. According to Edward Said, translation becomes a useful tool to domesticate the undecipherable. It should rather be an epistemic tool to make the unexplored available; after all knowledge is not produced in one language only. It should put a spoke in the hegemonic wheel of dominant culture. Mahasweta Devi's 'Dopdi' does exactly this.

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' (4). Dopdi's tribal song is a proof of identity that cannot be translated or recreated; neither by Mahasweta Devi nor by Spivak. There is something incommensurable in the act of translation, something untranslatable.

The postscripted part of the final section of the story 'Dopdi' which has no precedent in the metanarrative of the *Mahabharata* is the part that emerges as the tour-de-force of the story. The story becomes powerful not because of its comparison with the metanarrative but because of its very specificity when Dopdi says she is in a place where she will finally act for herself in not 'acting' in challenging the man to (en)counter her as unrecorded objective historical monument. 'We are sure of the derivation of Dopdi from Draupadi as we are of the author's hardly implicit point of view. The story of Draupadi, the narrative efficient cause of the battle of the great epic *Mahabharata*, is well known in India. God had prevented male lust from

unclothing her. And she had five husbands. This Dopdi, gang-raped by police, refuses to be clothed by men in office'(Spivak ix). This subversion defies translation into the global lingua franca; it defies all kinds of intellectual suppression. Inextricably mingling historico-political specificity with the sexual differential in a literary discourse, Mahasweta Devi invites us to begin questioning the given and the established norms for women. Quoting SaugataBhaduri's inference that "translation thus always moves from the 'literal' to the 'littoral', the shadowy, the liminal, forever disturbing and disorienting stabilities." Translation has within it the function of both legitimizing dominant positions as well as a certain subversive potential; it can destabilize discourses by taking them face to face with the other, and its relationship with power. SaugataBhaduri deals with the relationship between translation and power extensively in his *Translating Power*, and the following may offer a good summary of the threefold nature of the same. First, it can be one of straightforward *repression*, as instances of which one can mention two somewhat different strategies that translation as repression may adopt. The first of these is exemplified by the colonial and neo-colonial strategy of annihilating local cultures by translating the colonizer's forms of knowledge in local tongues and imposing them on the colonized, thus repressing, replacing and rendering redundant modes of indigenous scholarship and culture. There can be a translation of *resistance*, where its repressive and hegemonic potentials notwithstanding, translation can be subversively appropriated towards enablement, as to illustrate from the same context though translation is the vehicle to essentialize the colonized other in the colonizer's imagination. This apparently tokenistic showcasing can itself be taken advantage of for voicing the concerns of marginalized to a wider trans-cultural audience. Similarly, though translation may be the vehicle of inundating a local culture with the normative ideas of the center, the resultant exposure of erstwhile insulated groups to socio-cultural forms of other communities can lead to reformatory enablement. Thus, it becomes essential to study the relationship between power and translation, especially in its triadic forms of repression-hegemony-resistance.

Though Mahasweta Devi intends to present politics of domination, caste oppression, material violence, inhuman torture, repressive discourse, overarching hegemony, historical marginalization, and engineered exclusion, in her attempt she unknowingly co-opts the singularity into the mainstream dominant culture. Her aim should have been to engage with the diversified human and cultural experiences instead of casting it in a mold of legitimation through a comparison with the continuing patriarchal expansion. If difference is understood and enacted as self-containment and concomitant self-complacency, then there is a problem with regard to the concept of mutuality. Thus, the single-focus category "Indian" cannot be accepted without deconstructing its accompanying politics. As readers of literature one should be aware of the fact that nationalism and fundamentalism of any type is built on regimentation and exclusion. In constituting the normative, discourses often marginalize certain experiences or subjects as the other. To understand this process of "othering" one has to study mainstream canons critically.

Upi chooses to transgress the limits of honor by defining for herself a morality which is unprecedented. Mahasweta Devi is unsuccessful in underpinning the points of departure that make generalizations regarding Indian culture suspect. Even though the parallel of the mythological Draupadi is a constant point of reference in the story but there are still points of departure that make generalizations of Indian culture suspect. She is able to highlight the new spheres of values and establishes the constitutive nature of ambivalence. Mahasweta's story re-writes the episode from the metanarrative. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi— in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. This inversion is all fine but what bothers the reader is why does Mahasweta Devi draw from the *Mahabharata* to write a story about a tribal? Though she speaks from the perspective of the 'other,' she herself is trying to co-opt the subaltern UpiMejhen; which is a name Dopdi chooses herself to camouflage her identity as an activist. Spivak argues in her foreword that Draupadi is a name given to her by her Brahmin mistress, corrupted through usage becomes "Dopdi". Spivak dwells on the distortion of the name in the aboriginal context. I would however counter by questioning Mahasweta Devi and Spivak as to why in the first place should they 'corrupt' a tribal by giving her a name that is alien to her culture? Could the story have had the same impact if it was titled UpiMejhen, for instance? Could not Mahasweta Devi have an effervescence of a tribal name? But Upi is at a distance from the political activism of the male and the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female.

There is no denying the fact that the relation between art and life has altered in a fundamental sense that invalidates several of the universal discourses and assumptions. The manner in which literary forms emerge or decline, the way literary texts are received and internalized by society, language functions as a site of legitimating creative acts of sublimation or subversion. Here Mahasweta Devi deliberately co-opts the tribal woman into the mainstream to debunk the same. There is a comparison of the two distant cultures one Aryan and the other tribal to bring into focus the resistance of being tamed by the dominant patriarchy.

Comparative literature, according to Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, has an ideology of inclusion of the 'other' – be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types etc. Yet, it underscores the importance of previously marginalized or ignored linguistic and artistic expressions and forms that are an integral part of human experiences in our polyglot world. Mahasweta Devi too serves to 'sterilize' the master narrative of the nation's past off the rural class/gender/subaltern presence. Her narrative comprises ideological/nationalist, and colonizing/decolonizing frames. She releases the heterogeneity and restores some of its historical and geographical nomenclature.

In "Draupadi," the low-caste and the female gender act as weapons for counter-offense and counter-resistance. Spivak's intention is to effect an epistemic transformation of the concept of the monolithic 'third-world woman' by drawing attention to the mechanics of investigating the subaltern consciousness. With the nexus of theory and politics of Spivak's 'gendered subalternity,' "Draupadi" depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body

and her inner feminine core to fight against her marginality. Here, the woman's body becomes an instrument of vicious denunciation of patriarchy and hegemony which are ironical, counter-canonical, anti-literary, and contradictory. Simone deBeauvoir says, "If the respect or fear inspired by woman prevents the use of violence towards her, then the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power" (212).

Mahasweta Devi aptly said in her Ramon Magsaysay award acceptance speech in 1997 that, "My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process." Mahasweta Devi has used fiction not only to resurrect forgotten episodes of India's tribal and feudal past but to highlight acts of local resistance to aggression and oppression. Deeply stirred by how the tribals and the poor have been pauperized and abused, she set for her the task of savagely exposing the realities and structures of social and economic exploitation. In refusing to mystify what she sees, she shocks her middle-class readers into confronting a social cancer in Indian society. Thus, her story 'Dopdi' ruffles us from the complacency of our cultural insularity. Mahasweta Devi is an activist writer in the age of globalization. Her writings consistently highlight the need for the prevention of cultural hegemony and homogeneity.

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