All About Ambedkar: A Journal on Theory and Praxis
Volume 2, Number 2, 31 December 2021, pp. 88-99
ISSN 2582-9785

Subalternizing Caste: Questioning the Postcolonial Reading of Subalternity vis-à-vis Caste in Spivak's Translation of "Draupadi"

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ABSTRACT

In "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak proposes a terminology for the experiential language of historically marginalized individuals/communities, who have been systematically oppressed, in a paternalist, consumerist world order. The concept of subalternity, understood within the dichotomy of postcolonial literary theory, in South East Asia, situates the question of caste and gender on a prejudicial social order, based on sexual, racial, and occupational hierarchy of purity and inferiority. The question of caste and gender in India is complicated by the existence of the Dalit "other," whose oppression is designated by their historical location in the margins. The axiom of Dalit womanhood, when read at the intersection of gender and caste, infracts subjective categorisation proposed by a universal postcolonial identity. This paper argues how Spivak's brand of postcolonialism and Devi's partisanship misconstrues the atrophied socio-cultural hegemony of caste vis-à-vis gender. I deliberate on the possibility of an alternate epistemology, independent of Western paradigms of knowledge creation and criticism, and ideologically explicated historical fiction, as witnessed in Spivak's translator's comment and Mahasweta Devi's narrativization of Draupadi.

KEYWORDS: *Caste, Gender, Draupadi, Postcolonialism, Subaltern, Dalit womanhood*

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In Spivak's translation of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," part of her anthology *The Breast Stories*, Spivak focuses on the third world dilemma of subversive dissenting selfhoods against the larger socio-economic/cultural hegemony of an urban neoliberal monolith that is the collusion of the state and its mediators, consisting of the bureaucrats, the police and the contemporary petite bourgeoisie.

The hand of the nation-state is long and it reaches the deepest and most restive corners of the country, through its sympathizers and corporate beneficiaries, which sustain corruption and systematic oppression through heavy industrialization, agrarian usurpation, gentrification by resettling subaltern communities from the metropolis to the margin to oversee work in the minefields, factories and other institutions that mushroom in tandem with encroaching urbanity. This initiates a system of internal colonialization wherein the established minority of the region undergoes large-scale displacement and otherization within the existent social dichotomy of caste.

The question of subaltern phenomenology, in this context, is muddied from its very inception, as the margin and the centre intersect in the Dalit identity. Dalit, denoting here its Hindi etymology, meaning 'oppressed', provides a vast identity spectrum to dissenting indigenous peoples, the untouchables, the working classes, the bourgeoise militant, and the student revolutionary. Thus, in post-modern postcolonial Third World societies, strict dichotomies of varna hierarchy are often blurred, however, the identity/sexuality of women remain doubly marginalized.

During the late 60s and early 70s, peasant rebellions broke out in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal. After spreading throughout the entire Eastern tribal and rural belt of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Andhra, the rebellion took the form of a mass protest led chiefly by the radical Left, the parliamentary Left having already gone into cohorts with the ruling government at the centre, which incorporated within it a large section of the urban educated middle-class youth and intellectual sympathizers who questioned the fallacies and capitalist/imperialist agendas of the state. Under the benign banner of socialism and welfare, the state cracked down on labour/working class unions and leased out lands to landlords/corporate or large national holdings which gave rise to more itinerant and landless farmers and labourers who, along with the tribals and scheduled communities, found themselves evicted of their land, fooled out of their share

of the produce, weighed with loans on high interest etc., all of which resulted in the Naxalbari, Tebhagha and Telangana movements, incorporating disparate issues of caste, class, gender, socio-economic stagnancy, failure of governance, large scale joblessness etc.

The Naxalbari agitation focalized and developed on subalternity as its core issue, with armed resistance as its foundational ethos. In tracing the sporadic nature of the uprisings, it can be deliberated that the movement was essentially a plausible fallout of years of repression and oppression of Dalit peoples/communities, which took on and responded to issues of untouchability, landlessness, historic brutalization of bodies of the marginalized in post-Independent India. Thus, at its initial phase, before its incorporation into the Maoist-Marxist doctrine, the Naxalbari uprising had a distinct Dalit character to it. In that, it germinated and was shaped to a large extent by the grassroot mobilization of the depressed people. In this, it was reminiscent of earlier instances of resistance and rebellion championed by the peasants, labourers, and Adivasi peoples, such as The Rangpur Uprising (1783); Bhill Uprisings (1818-1831); The Kol Uprising (1831-1832); The Faraizi Movement (1819); The Santhal Rebellion (1822-1829) etc, indicative of a socio-economic synergy and syncretism which is responsible for fostering political dissent among the oppressed of this subcontinent, through ages.

In the event of the Naxalbari agitation, however, the revolutionary sentiment prevalent among the critically conscious urban youth, often belonging to an upper-caste elite minority, who championed themselves as natural allies of the Naxalite movement; and the severe crackdown of the state on their activities, took the focus away from the grassroot activism of the landless peasants, the tribals and the namasudras, who initially spearheaded and took up arms against the landlords, the middlemen and the state machinery. The intense politicization with the inclusion of the intellectuals at an early stage of the movement, such as that of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, bound the spontaneity of the uprising within a narrow realm of political arms struggle which may have resulted in its eventual undoing.

Following the imagined footsteps of resistance, despite the shortcomings, the Naxalite movement was able to mobilize sympathizers from among the marginalized and the oppressed, who henceforth chose to violently rebel against their subalternity,

echoing the Marxian message of devolution of the power structure in opposition to the hegemony of the capitalist state and the Maoist dialectic of violent praxis against the purported bourgeoisie.

One such story is of Dopdi Mehjen, an indigenous Santhal woman, whose brutalization under imprisonment, authorized by the state machinery through the hands of the officer Senanayak, leads to her final detachment from her previous oppressed identity as just another Adivasi into that of a dissenting Dalit woman. In Spivak's reading of the text, and in its translation, Draupadi or Dopdi undergoes a process of conscientization, wherein, she confronts and challenges that very authority that attempted to deface and devolve her of any vestige of power that she had wielded before as a revolutionary and as an aid to the cause of the Naxals. Her unwavering resistance against submission to shame, at the end of the narrative, despite the torture and disruption of body autonomy through rape and mutilation, whereby she openly and defiantly calls out to the bourgeoisie state benefactor to 'counter' her, according to Spivak, stands in for Mahasweta Devi's assertion of the humanized personhood of the subaltern against the dehumanising machinery of the state. The ambiguity of caste oppression in Bengal and the intersectional sense of solidarity expressed by Devi in her depiction of Dopdi's partisanship and Senanayak's hypocrisy depict, for Spivak, the trauma of the subaltern who has learnt to speak.

To corroborate my intended criticism of Spivak's interpretation of the translation as a postcolonial text, I would like to quote Henry Schwarz, from his essay "Provocations Toward a Theory of Third World Literature":

> The demands of the double question – "does the Third World speak, and what do we hear when it does?" – are among the most pressing for a contemporary cultural criticism, and include problems of identity and difference, self and other, hermeneutic "reliability', and the meta-critical issue of what it means to be asking such questions in the first place. The current proliferation of studies on "Third World literature" point to a general acceptance by the U.S academic community of a delineated "field" on which to carry out research, pass judgement, theorize and proselytize. Despite the ready acceptance of Third World texts by the U.S literary

> scene and their unprecedented acclaim by international award agencies, it would be well to remember that these texts, once posed as a challenge to traditional cannons by oppositional movements in the sixties, have now become institutionalized as a "discipline" that celebrates a premature renaissance in the curricular debates . . . While we may applaud the inclusion of alternative curricula into conservative institutions, the "professionalization" of "Third world literature" in the academy undoubtedly diminishes the potency of those originally radical forces by making an object of third world cultural production . . . However, when we ask the question of how one reads "Third World literature", or how one approaches the third world literary text as subject, the issue becomes more complicated . . . As with the related theory of Post-modernism, "Worlds" theory is impossibly broad and general. What can be offered . . . though, are provocations – provisional and situational attempts to think through the immediate contradictions presented by this literature as we now actively read it . . . Such provocations can serve the interim function of "calling forth" our reactions to the Third World cultural production and to be uneased . . . by them. (178)

Spivak tackles the ambiguous and often conflicted Third World nomenclature of Dalit womanhood from an overarching postcolonial lens, with gender conceptualized as a site of struggle; subaltern agency conceptualized beyond the specificities of geographical location; and resistance conceptualized as a site that gave rise to a political agency through movements for self-determination, with the dexterity of a first world academician. Thus, it can be argued that Spivak assiduously attempts a broad postcolonial categorization in her translation, concerned with Western theories of poststructuralism, from the philosophical prism of Foucault and Derrida. As a result, overemphasis on dichotomies of power and gender have failed to grasp the intricacies of the inextricably intertwined identities of Draupadi, the Adivasi Naxal revolutionary who is also a conscientious Dalit, both by gender, race/caste and political affiliation, from the yet more complex identity of the dehumanised Senanayak and the radically motivated upper-caste intellectual Mahasweta Devi.

Pertaining to the proposed criticism of this paper, which was also my previous argument, I would like to quote Nivedita Majumdar's "Silencing the Subaltern: Resistance and Gender in Postcolonial Theory" where she raises criticism on how theorists such as Spivak, Guha, and Bhabha have problematized the conceptualization of resistance and subalternity vis-à-vis gender in postcolonial studies. Majumdar notes:

> Guha draws primarily on archival research, Spivak's intervention is more focused on the landscape of poststructuralist theory. But they both seek to recover and acknowledge instances of women's resistance that either are ignored by establishment discourses or are suppressed in the exercise of power . . . Much like Guha, Spivak discovers . . . resistance that dominant discourses and conventions supposedly refused to recognize – not by uncovering it where it had been obscured but by redefining it – or . . . by turning it into its opposite. The effacement of women's agency when it takes organized, collective form is on display. . . in Spivak's commentary on Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi." "Draupadi" is a key text illuminating both the rurality of the Indian state's suppression of the Naxalite movement and the heroism and solidarity of the youth who compromised its political cadre. Draupadi joins the movement with her husband . . . and she values the movement itself enough to withstand inhuman torture and rape at the hands of the police. But if we turn to Spivak's commentary, this political and organizational dimensions of Draupadi's agency are strenuously pushed to the background.

Spivak, in the Translator's Foreword, confines her focus to the final sentences of the story when Draupadi is presented to Senanayak and refuses to clean and clothe herself for her interview. Draupadi the subaltern revolutionary comes into her own for Spivak only after her gendered brutalization:

> It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful 'subject.' It is in her refusal to follow instructions, in choosing not to act, that she emerges as a conscious agent, so that "she will finally act for herself in not 'acting.'" (Devi 388)

As for her life as a revolutionary prior to her capture, Spivak blithely dismisses it as Draupadi's way of keeping political faith as an act of faith toward her husband. Indeed, her immersion in the revolutionary movement only continues her gendered subordination, which is why, for Spivak, her torture marks a break, it provides her with the opening to emerge out of the shadows of the men in her life. Spivak here refers to Draupadi's dead husband and comrade and more pertinently, to the leadership of the Naxalite movement.

Contra Spivak's reading, there is not even the slightest hint in the story that Draupadi joins the movement as her husband's shadow, that her activism is shaped by a distant "male leadership," so on and so forth. On the contrary, in the events leading up to her capture, Mahasweta Devi offers us a window into the girl's thoughts:

> Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing 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. They countered him. When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. Killed by police in an encounter. . . unknown male . . . age twenty-two. (Devi 397)

Everything we learn about Draupadi's state of mind, every thought that Devi reveals to us in her narrative, is presented to generate an organic link between Draupadi's political conviction, her commitment to her comrades — male and female — and her contemptuous dismissal of Senanayak's command all of which Spivak sweeps aside. This gesture by Spivak not only devalues and submerges Draupadi's political agency, but it also reinserts a highly paternalistic, and hence patriarchal, view regarding her choices. Her subjectivity is affirmed when she steps forth and expresses awareness of her subjugation specifically as a woman — when the brutalization occurs to her body.

The bulk of the narrative in "Draupadi" is dedicated to highlighting precisely those dimensions of the woman's consciousness that Spivak dismisses as irrelevant. What Spivak holds up as a paradigm of resistance is Draupadi's refusal to obey a single command, not her refusal to abide by an exploitative and patriarchal social order. What is admired is her act as an individual, not her willing and conscious participation in a revolutionary movement — and not just as an individual but as a woman. As Spivak

puts it herself, only when Draupadi experiences violence that "can only happen to a woman" does she come into her own as a historical subject — not when she experiences violence as an indigent peasant or a revolutionary. There is a direct line connecting this argument with Guha's valourization of a woman's biological realm as the natural habitat for her resistance — a remarkable return to the very tropes that feminists have tried for decades to overturn.

The role of the writer is not devoid of its political rhetoric pertaining to her socialist ideology as an upper-caste activist. She cannot be exempted from her class/caste position which coloured her solidarity to the cause of the oppressed of her nation. Sharmilla Rege articulates my thoughts as she notes in "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint":

> The ambivalence of the left towards women's issues was . . . countered by an assertion that women essentially connected with other women; the 'subjective experiences of knowledge' became the basis of the theorizing universal experience of womanhood. 'Experience' thus became the base for personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression. From such an epistemological position, there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood.

Devi's short stories, written in the manner of historical realism, portray a tendency towards a higher emphasis on the dehumanisation of the lives of the oppressed, meaning to shock the genteel readership of her native Bengal which remains highly ambivalent, as a culture, towards the reality of caste and racial discrimination; as part of her politics of mythmaking and glorification of the Dalit reality as a violent space, to support her act of storytelling and subvert it into an act of truth reading, for her readership.

Thus, to focus attention away from the uncomfortable ambivalence and contradictory nature of her presence as a spokesperson for the Dalit and subaltern cause in the intellectual circuits of the metropolis, Devi vehemently questions and critics

those who occupy a similar class/caste position as herself. She questions the tenets of the neoliberal tendencies of the sympathizers of the Dalit cause and their silent complicity in Dopdi's torture and imprisonment. The institutionalized approach on matters of caste, Dalit/Adivasi womanhood etc., practised by the neoliberal cultural elites of the nation, their ignorance and alienation while commenting on the narrative of the Other from behind a glass wall etc., are scathingly put forward as dark humour throughout the narrative of Draupadi. All these devices employed by Devi inform my argument on her inherent dilemma and sense of inferiority as a writer, for she may have been aware that she was misappropriating by denying the agency to the subaltern whose life she was depicting, and was thus, doing injustice to the entirety of the lived experience of her characters.

To Spivak's credit, her reading of the narrative helps to selectively deconstruct the metanarrative around the name *Draupadi* whereby her name and its other interpretation, Dopdi, contextualizes, in the Vedic tradition of the cultural repertoire of the nation, the almost transgressive reiteration in the context of the Adivasi other whose Dalit womanhood lends thematic and socio-religious sublimity to the supposed savarna identity of the mythic figure of Draupadi. Dopdi's Dalit identity when juxtaposed with a symbolic name finds reasoning and literary credibility under Spivak's translation. However, Spivak's analysis fails to fully comprehend how the lack of a divine agency marks Dopdi's act as truly radical in its resistance to brutalization through violation of body autonomy vis a vis Draupadi in the Mahabharata myth.

Spivak also credibly deconstructs the narrative of Draupadi by juxtaposing it with other narratives of Mahasweta Devi in *The Breast Stories* anthology, whereby she attempts to construct a strict paradigm based on Western literary tropes concerning women's loss of body autonomy under the villainization and otherization of the state, emphasizing on one of the most sexualised, yet simultaneously dehumanised part of the woman's body in the context of the modern Indian state. The glorification of the breast as a symbol of the socio-cultural signification of the mother in the imagination of the nation-state underlies the patriarchal practice whereby breasts embody the sanctity of entire families and communities. The violation of which would naturally imply

domination over the bodies of the Other, through the oppression of the bodies of their women.

Spivak masterfully graphs how the mutilation and gross disfigurement is perpetrated on their bodies in the hopes of domination and imposition of a practised ideology/socio-economic hegemony on those who are considered impure/inferior. However, her approach is not sufficient and rather misplaced to deal with the whole conflicted spectrum of intersecting identities, which is the essential spirit of Draupadi's short story and the dilemma of Third World social theory.

To Spivak's credit, she does allude to some of the spaces she had to overlook in lieu of the publishers and the general readership she had intended the commentary and translation for. Still, Spivak's personal politics of translation adds another facet to my argument about the question of caste and how it is essentially a dogmatic socio-cultural phenomenon of the Indic civilization, which must be understood outside an individualist subjectivity based of Western paradigms of knowledge and criticism as explicated by Spivak.

Mahasweta Devi's direct involvement as a radical transformer and evangelist to the cause of the oppressed, makes the translation inadequate to ask the right questions or to articulate Devi's zeal and ideological thrust in representing, without any sugar-coating, the dehumanising lives of the Dalit women, outside the academic/intellectual left spaces of Bengal, who make a living selling the narratives of Draupadi and many like her.

Henry Schwarz elaborates on the location of Mahasweta Devi as a woman whose activism and writing has occupied a liminal space, socio-politically, compared to her male contemporaries, as in the following:

> Of the various progressive Indian writers, Mahasweta Devi has . . . begun to attract attention in the West. Her stories reflect a direct involvement with the Naxalite movement, particularly in her attention to this doubly perspective: the terminology of radical Marxism mingles with the dialect of he Santal tribals who made up its insurgent base. Mahasweta's writing attempts to speak from the subject-position of the subaltern while recognising the difficulty of knowing this subject completely . . . The

anciently poor migrant workers and peasants who populate these stories are not fully knowable in literature (indeed, they are for the most part illiterate themselves); and yet, like the city intellectuals turned Naxalite insurgents in "Dhraupadi", Mahasweta shows how writers themselves can begin "orienting their book learning to the soil they live on and learning new combat and survival skills". This writing is far from the indigenous (an exemplary) social realist tradition. Mahasweta has . . .invented a new literary form that . . . symbolically solve the problems of unintelligibility presented by these new subjects. In moments of confrontation, landowners and government officials face for the first time the terror of confronting the Other, experienced as an epistemic violence that shatters self-mastery and distinctions of caste and class. The primordial battles over economic exploitation is transformed here into linguistic or semiotic ones that again raise problems of knowledge and meaning. Yet, within this radical devaluation of hierarchy and social difference . . . we . . . confront the inexorable systematicity of these relations, as they become revealed to us as permutations or epiphenomena of some much larger and profoundly unknowable order that must remain unspoken. (191)

In conclusion, I would like to focus on the word "counter," which is a conscious literary element used by both Devi and Spivak, alternately to challenge the hegemony of the state in the figure of Senanayak through Draupadi's resistance and also to redeem its subversive quality in spite of its dominant origin within the pedagogy of the state. According to Spivak, the word counter becomes the locus of this transformative capacity. The text reads: "Tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will *counter* me. Let them . . . killed by police in an encounter" (Devi 397). Counter is the mispronunciation of an official word, transformed as a reality of "encounter" of the oppressed and the oppressor in a moment of resistance and agency assertion. Dopdi mispronounces, yet fully understands the multiple registers of the word. Thus, Dopdi, as an allegory of the inscrutability of the sign, is reduced and constrained to rational signification by her capture, interrogation, and representation at the hands of the expert. In the vital disjunction of the expert's knowledge – between

theory and practice, sympathy and control – the sign (or subaltern) erupts and demands to be confronted again in its inscrutability, stripped of the master code of systematicity, the counter-violence by which it can register its presence.

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