

ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF MAHASWETA'S FEMINISTIC WRITINGS



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ABSTRACT

Mahsweta Devi is Bengali writer and activist. Her writings in English are widely read and appreciated through translations by eminent critics and men of letters such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samik Bandyopadhyay & Kalpana Bardhan. She is remembered and respected as a crusader and fighter against injustice specially to the tribal people who are the oppressed, the exploited, the neglected and the outcasts. Her fame lies in exposing the caste and gender problems, prevalent in the society. Her unique and realistic presentation of miserable Indian women, especially tribal ones touches her readers' heart with the appeal of sympathy for them. She also wrote about women's place in Indian society. Some of the characters in her stories are old women living in poverty, and some of them are exploited because of their lack of wealth; however, some of them are middle class (one of them is even college-educated). Regardless of their status, though, they all suffer some kind of mistreatment, whether it's physical or mental abuse, but not all of them are willing to accept their fate. With the help of the English translations of her amazing main writings, I have endeavoured through this paper to search out and analyze her concern for the condition of Indian women with their different manner of opposing and protesting the injustice done to them by the privileged. She was honoured with various literary awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), Jnanpith Award and Ramon Magsaysay Award along with India's civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. Her name will definitely remain immortal for the service of humanity although she has left this mortal world in July of the current year. I pay heartily tribute to such a great writer and activist.

Key words –activist, crusader, tribal, translation, bereaved, breast, oppression

INTRODUCTION

As a humanist writer, activist & crusader, Mahsweta Devi opposed West Bengal's policies of stripping indigenous people of their land, and established an organization that reported



atrocities committed against tribes to India's National Human Rights Commission. Critics complained that her writing could be simplistic in casting India's tribes people as saints battling the villainous landlords who exploited them. "Her tribal characters are too much the noble savage," wrote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the Indian cultural critic who translated a collection of Ms. Devi's short stories into English. Devi spent decades documenting life among India's tribal communities. She writes about women and their place in Indian society. Some of the characters in her stories are old women living in poverty, and some of them are exploited because of their lack of wealth; however, some of them are middle class (one of them is even college-educated). Regardless of their status, though, they all suffer some kind of mistreatment, whether it's physical or mental abuse, but not all of them are willing to accept their fate. *Mother of 1084* (translated. by Samik Bandyopadhyay), a popular novel that was made into a movie in the late 1990s In her novel "Mother of 1084" (1974), she wrote of the grief of a bereaved mother fighting for the Maoist rebellion, an insurgency in India's tribal belt that has roiled parts of central and eastern India. *Mother of 1084* takes place two years after the killings. In fact, the mother in the story—Sujata Chatterjee—is trying to understand why her youngest son, Brati (known to the government as Corpse No. 1084) was a part of this movement and why he had to die for it. Everyone else in her family, however, has already moved on. In fact, on the anniversary of Brati's death—which also happens to be his birthday—Sujata's daughter Tuli is hosting a party for her fiancé, Tony Kapadia, and his family. Sujata would have preferred to have the party on a different day, but no one really asked her. That's because her family doesn't have much respect for her. Despite having a college degree, she has to defend her decision to work at a bank. Also, the children tend to side with her husband, even though he's been cheating on his wife without even trying to hide it. The other reason the children go against her is because of the close connection she had with Brati, even though, ironically, they also criticize her for not crying at the youngest son's funeral. They disliked Brati, not only because he was a spoiled child who received special treatment that the other children never received, but because of his beliefs. In fact, his father was so ashamed of Brati's involvement with the group that instead of going to the morgue to identify the body, he was more concerned about making sure the newspapers didn't mention his name. However, as the novel progresses, Sujata realizes that she didn't know her son as well as she thought she had. It may sound as if Devi has written a novel that is too sympathetic to terrorism. However, to the author's credit, the focus of the novel is really Sujata and her refusal to forget about her son, even if it means disapproval from the rest of her family. Through visiting another mother of a Naxalite and Brati's girlfriend, Nandini, she also learns about herself and how her subservient ways could have widened the distance between her and her son. Sujata's discoveries, though, lead to a very long denouement that introduces some new characters rather late into the novel. In fact, the final chapter, which takes place during the party, doesn't add a lot to the overall story. In addition, the novel contains some weak passages that are distracting and blunt the impact of what could have been a very powerful novel



Devi's stories are remarkable for their complete lack of sentimentality. The hard life stories of the tribal people who are oppressed by the moneylenders and landlords, condescended to by the government, aided in uselessly inappropriate ways by charity groups and well-meaning city people, are described in her distinctively matter-of-fact style. The history of the region is integral to many stories, but it is taken for granted and never explained. Many readers may miss the finer details of the classes and cultures, but will still be shaken by the stories themselves 'Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels' also contains several of her stories. They are translated by the editor, Kalpana Bardhan, and have a distinctly different tone than those in 'Breast Stories'. Mahasweta Devi writes in a mixture of tribal and folk dialects and urban Bengali. Her language is probably very hard to translate, and the two editors have taken different approaches. The stories in 'Of Women...' flow easily in English, and one tends to focus on the story and characters who are quite riveting in themselves. In 'Breast Stories' the English is intentionally awkward at times, and the unusual language startles the reader into awareness that there are words and worlds beyond the English translation. The five stories by Mahasweta Devi in 'Of Women...' are linked, set in East Bihar in a community of landless peasants. As always, they detail the devastating oppression under which the characters suffer -- by the Rajput landlords, the moneylenders, the police, the BDOs (Block Development Officials) -- yet, in each story, someone is fighting the tide. In 'Paddy Seeds', Dulan is used by a landlord to suppress any stirrings of rebellion in the village, but at the same time Dulan is cleverly manipulative himself. 'Dhowli' is an outcaste girl who has the misfortune of having the landlord's son fall for her. Dhowli has few options, and the ending is sad, but her own fortitude saves this from being just another mournful tale of oppression. 'Giribala' leaves her wastrel husband and her saddest thoughts are that she wished she had done it earlier. The characters in the stories are immensely tough, in spite of a system that grinds them down at every step. It is this innate sense of raw rebellion that makes the stories so impressive - she forces the reader to feel the humanity of every one of her Ganjus and Dusads. Some of the stories in *Breast Stories*. In fact, in my opinion, out of these three books, this one contains two of Devi's best stories, "Draupadi" and "Breast-giver." The first gives us a strong female revolutionary, Dopdi Mejhen, who shows that a woman's breast can be a powerful weapon against evil. The scene where this happens only lasts about a page, but it's the strong imagery—as well as the reaction of the main villain, Senanayak—that makes it truly unforgettable.

"Breast-giver," on the other hand, argues that the same breasts that could be used against evil could also be used against someone who is willing to exploit them. This is what happens to Jashoda, who decides one day to become a wet nurse in order to provide for her own family. After years of nursing many infants, though, she suffers from breast cancer, and the adults who once benefited from her mother's milk treat her with indifference. Yet, throughout the novel, she makes her own decisions, even though the choices she made were not always the right ones.



The final story, “Behind the Bodice,” which was published 17 years after “Breast Story,” is not quite as effective as the other two. Like “Draupadi,” this tale shows how powerful a woman’s breasts can be. This time, though, Gangor’s breasts are being used for a couple purposes: First, to seduce an Upin Puri, an “ace photographer,” who becomes so enamoured with them that he feels he has to “save them”; and second, they’re helping her expose police corruption. However, the idea that Upin’s photos led to the police corruption is not very convincing since it seems to come out of nowhere. Also, it contains the same kind of jarring shifts that marred the stories in *Old Women*: Much of the story goes back and forth between Upin’s history with Gangor and the conversation between Upin’s wife, Shital, and his friend, Ujan, who discuss the photos and wonder why Upin is so obsessed with the breasts. As a result, “Behind the Bodice” lacks the originality of the other stories in *Breast Stories*, and the reader is just left with another story about a dangerous obsession.

Analyzing her skill of presenting injustice to tribal women, we touchingly look at Mahasweta Devi’s story, the main character Dopdi is stripped naked by the officials. No god comes to save her honor. The power composition Power over makes her question Senanayak, who alone directs his police to humiliate the tribal woman. It is not an ordinary humiliation; it is a gang-rape ordered and performed by the leader himself. This heinous act of disrobing and making her naked, empowers the lady. Miller’s quotes from Srilatha Batliwala, defines the features of empowerment. When a woman //man experiences the oppression, she/he swings into action to free herself / himself from the oppression. The change is possible because of her / his power that is empowerment. Dopdi, a twenty-seven year old tribal woman, is named by her mistress and she is in the list of wanted persons who had killed the mistress husband, Surja Sahu a land-owning money lender, because he refuses to share water with untouchables. A reward of two hundred rupees is announced for her head. Dopdi herself seen that notice at the Panchayat office. Mr. Senanayak, an official, moves with the tribal as their friend and successfully corners Dopdi in the evening. She is kept at the canvas-camp till the dinner time. Senanayak permits the officials to do whatever they like. Her hands and legs are tied to four posts. She becomes unconscious. In the morning she is brought to the tent. On seeing the General the dishonored Dopdi walks towards him to exhibit what has happened to her.

Draupadi stands up. . . . Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. . . . Senanayak . . . sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up; don't you want to see how they made me?



“Draupadi” is a tribalized reincarnation of mythical Draupadi, and the tale of ‘rape-murder-lockup torture’ in police custody. It captures the torturing experience of Santhal tribe, DraupadiMejhen with multi-faced personality. “Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the ancient Draupadi ... They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names. She cannot pronounce even her name because of the dalit tongue and dialect. “The story is a moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the one hand, a law that is fabricated with a view to its own transgression, on the other, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles. The tale exposes the dalit feminist consciousness in its initial exposition itself: “What’s this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name? Dopdi and Dulna are married couple, active workers in Naxalbari movement and fights for their prime necessities. After Dulna’s murder, Draupadi is brutally molested by the policemen in their attempts to extract information about the fugitives

Senanayak, the army chief, torments Dopdi. As a counter-offense, she tears her clothes and makes herself naked as a figure of refusal in front of Police authorities, displaying her crushed body. Rajan comments, “Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, the horror of rape diminish her. It is 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. She is at a distance from the political activism of the male and the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female. Her confidence and courage dare to look at the public without any hesitation. She laughs weirdly with the blind acceptance of humiliation, corruption, molestation, and disentangled chain of patriarchal shame. Her stubborn refusal to cover herself humiliates the male officers. She is defiant with self protest, charms with counter-resistance and retaliation, and celebrates the ‘woman-power’ with honour, diversity and resolution. She experiences the subaltern woman within the context of historical juncture of ‘interregnum’ where woman are concerned with its connotation of violation, imposition of force, destruction of psyche, and alignment of victimization. As Draupadi’s revenge excerpts: “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? Her legitimized pluralization (victimized person), in singularity (subaltern woman) is used to demonstrate male glory. Spivak says, “Mahasweta’s story questions this ‘singularity’ by placing Dopdi first in a comradely, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. “Draupadi” shares the cultural memories with ‘secret encounters with singular figures,’ but its ‘subject- representation and constitution is deliberately palimpsest and contrary. Thus we see that Devi’s “Draupadi,” a tribal rebel is raped by authorities of the state.

The story culminates into Draupadi's postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference in challenging man to (en) counter as un/ mis- recorded objective historical monument. Here, the female nudity questions the enemy: "negation of negation, and thus, Hegel's double negation is superimposed. She projects as an 'unarmed target' and a 'terrifying super object' with her horrifying gestures: "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed... What more can you do? Dopdi's action is "a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities [...] that has become apparent, at least after a general review of the facts" which becomes a repressive response to the superior power . Michel Foucault entitles it as 'instrument- effect' which explains the reverse mode of protest against perversion of [male] power. It also imposes that Dopdi's consumed body becomes an instrumental strike back against the suppression of superior authority."Draupadi" serves an exemplum for the dictum: "your sex is a terrible wound. Here, the female body acts as a weapon for resistance, the female body speaks as a sword for identity, and the female body epitomizes as a synecdoche for survival. The tale explores the conflicts between remnant colonial morality and subalternity. From the root epic Mahabharatha onwards, the brutal cannibalistic exploitation and molestation begin with Draupadi's public unrobing. "Draupadi" is a reincarnation of mythical Draupadi, as both parallels the inherent semiotics of subjugation. As Hira Bansodearticulates the spirit of dalit women who are in condemned state of celebrated mythical figures like 'Slaves'.Thus we have observed that Mahasweta Devi is a social activist who has wholly involved herself to work even through her writings for the struggles of the tribal people (especially women) in Indian states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In the fiction themed on Bengal which Devi writes, she often narrates the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising landlords, money lenders and government officials in this belt. Her presentation of women is really unique,realistic and touching.Thus my paper has presented an analytical approach to the English translations of Mahasweta's feministic writings.

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