



When voice is no longer possible: Embodied defiance and the collapse of authority in Maheswata Devi's *Draupadi*

Dr. Jewelina Chowdhury

Assistant Professor, Department of English

North Gauhati College

Abstract

The study examines Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* to explore how subaltern female agency is enacted through embodied resistance and strategic silence. Focusing on the protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal woman engaged in the Naxalite movement, the study investigates how her refusal to submit, shown through her deliberate muteness and bodily defiance, challenges patriarchal and state authority. Drawing on Spivak's theory of the subaltern and Beauvoir's insights on gendered power, the analysis foregrounds how silence, gaze, and corporeal performance function as deliberate, performative acts of resistance, destabilizing conventional hierarchies and reconfiguring notions of agency beyond verbal articulation. The study situates Devi's narrative within Dalit feminist and postcolonial frameworks, highlighting the intersections of gender, caste, and political oppression, while demonstrating that mythic retellings can amplify marginalized voices and create a "counter-archive" of subaltern resistance. Ultimately, *Draupadi* exemplifies the radical potential of embodied defiance, illustrating that subaltern women assert power even when conventional forms of voice are denied or dangerous.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, *Draupadi*, subalternity, embodied resistance, silence, agency, postcolonial feminism, Dalit feminism

Introduction

Renowned Indian author and activist Mahasweta Devi consistently foregrounds the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly women, in her literary works. Her compelling short story *Draupadi* critiques patriarchal and state oppression, especially as it impacts lower-caste and tribal women.

At the center of the narrative is Draupadi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal rebel whose story of survival and resistance provides a nuanced lens into the dynamics of female agency in postcolonial Indian society. The plot revolves around the uprising of indigenous peasants against exploitative landlords in Naxalbari, West Bengal, situating the narrative within the larger context of socio-political turbulence during the 1970s.

Draupadi Mejhen emerges as a formidable figure within the Naxalite movement—a radical communist insurgency committed to challenging structural oppression. Alongside her husband, Dulan, she engages actively in violent resistance, demonstrating unwavering dedication to social justice. In response, state authorities pursue her with brutal rigor, employing intimidation and sexual violence to enforce compliance. Through Draupadi's resilience and steadfast rebellion, Devi exposes the formidable obstacles encountered by women at the intersection of gendered, caste-based, and political subjugation. Devi's narrative style mirrors the complex power dynamics of postcolonial India, employing a polyphonic structure that reflects diverse social and political discourses. Draupadi's experiences of oppression, particularly her gang rape by state authorities, are not merely instances of victimhood but catalysts for performative defiance. Her refusal to submit or vocalize expected shame illustrates, as Beauvoir asserts, that "the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power if the respect or fear inspired by the woman prevents the use of violence towards her" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 212). In this context, Draupadi's embodied resistance transforms her body into a site of political agency, disrupting patriarchal and state hierarchies. From a Dalit feminist and postcolonial perspective, *Draupadi* amplifies the voices of the oppressed while interrogating the intersections of gender, caste, and nationalism. Drawing on Culler's concept of "difference by differing" (1981, p. 282) and Anderson's "pluralization of difference" (1991, p. 96), the story reveals how identity categories intersect to marginalize women. Spivak's analysis further situates Draupadi within the frameworks of patriarchal and colonial subjugation: "the figure of the woman disappears between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation...a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1985, p. 83). Such framing underscores the systematic silencing of subaltern women while emphasizing the radical potential of embodied resistance.

In Maheshwata Devi's reimagining, Draupadi navigates her marginalization through both silence and bodily defiance, challenging hegemonic structures via performative acts rather than verbal articulation. Spivak notes that "woman is thus caught between the regressive 'jealousy' of the colonized

male and the interested ‘normalization’ of capital” (1985, p. 9), highlighting how women’s autonomy is constrained by intersecting forms of oppression. Yet, through her refusal to submit, her unflinching gaze, and her physical endurance, Draupadi asserts agency, transforming the “sexed specificity of the female body” into a site of empowerment rather than erasure. The objective of this study is to examine how subalternity and performative acts are represented through Draupadi’s character and to explore the modes of resistance employed by gendered subalterns against systemic oppression.

Scholarly engagement with feminist retellings of myths demonstrates a persistent focus on restoring women’s “lost voices” to literary and cultural discourse. Critics such as Vrinda Nabar argue that women in Hindu epics have historically been represented through male desire and narrative expectations, emphasizing how patriarchal frameworks constrain feminine expression. This foundational scholarship explains why feminist writers often feel compelled to correct these silenced narratives. However, much of this discourse assumes verbal articulation as the primary form of protest, which risks overlooking the nuanced ways silence and performative acts operate as forms of resistance. Publications in *Women’s Writing* (Taylor & Francis) stress the importance of reclaiming one’s voice as a central feminist activity. Yet, such perspectives often remain Western-centric and repetitive, neglecting the cultural and political risks women face in speaking out within socially restrictive contexts. Scholars like Kumkum Sangari (Routledge) acknowledge the cultural coding of silence, though they tend to interpret it primarily as a consequence of politics rather than an active strategy of defiance. This interpretation, while significant, limits understanding of silence as a deliberate, performative mode of resistance. In the context of Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal analysis of *Draupadi* (Routledge) highlights how Devi refuses to confine Draupadi’s suffering within traditional narrative limits. Spivak interprets Draupadi’s physical exposure not merely as vulnerability, but as a rejection of colonial and patriarchal authority, emphasizing the potency of bodily and non-verbal resistance. Devi’s depiction challenges the conventional framing of silence as weakness, instead presenting it as a complex, rhetorical instrument. Scholarly analyses of feminist mythic retellings, such as those by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Volga (Taylor & Francis), emphasize the articulation of interiority, embodied agency, and the experience of suffering, positioning mythic reinterpretation as a critical and historiographic intervention that challenges dominant patriarchal narratives. While these approaches are significant, they sometimes underplay silence as a deliberate, subversive strategy, reflecting latent patriarchal interpretive assumptions. Much of Indian literature draws heavily on Hindu mythology as both a narrative framework and a means of addressing

social, political, and historical traumas. The Mahabharata, in particular, provides a rich repository of archetypal characters and stories that writers have reinterpreted to critique social hierarchies and political oppression. Northrop Frye observes that “literature is allusive and seems to radiate from a center,” suggesting that myths, legends, and folk narratives form the intertextual foundations of literary discourse. Devi’s *Draupadi*, set against the socio-political upheavals of 1971 West Bengal, documents the brutal exploitation of landless peasants by landlords, moneylenders, police, and Block Development Officials. The narrative centers on Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Majhi, a married tribal couple who resist systemic oppression through violent defiance, participating actively in the Naxalite movement. Through Dopdi, Devi portrays the subaltern’s struggle to challenge both class-based confinement and patriarchal domination. Spivak notes that “the target of these movements was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm workers, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law” (Devi, 1981, p. 385). This underscores how Devi’s narrative situates the gendered subaltern at the intersection of systemic violence, class exploitation, and the politics of resistance.

Critical scholarship on gender, myth, and the subaltern has extensively examined Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* (Devi, 1981). Scholars have highlighted issues of protest and resistance within the socio-political transformations of Bengal during the 1970s (Spivak, 1985, p. 83). This study primarily relies on the 1981 English translation of Devi’s Bengali story *Draupadi*, translated and introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Secondary sources from Routledge and Taylor & Francis were selected for their grounding in feminist theory and postcolonial critique, enabling an informed engagement with issues of gendered representation, agency, and voice in mythic retellings. Peer-reviewed literature on embodiment, narrative silence, and postcolonial feminism was consulted to contextualize and critique prevalent assumptions about voice and resistance (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 212; Culler, 1981, p. 282; Anderson, 1991, p. 96).

Given the subtlety of silence, gesture, and narrative gaps in representing subaltern resistance, this research adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology focused on meticulous textual analysis. The study employs a comparative approach, analyzing Devi’s rendition of the Mahabharata alongside the original epic to investigate how silence and bodily acts function as modes of resistance. A qualitative, interpretative method was favored over quantitative analysis, as silence is rhetorical, expressive, and

emotionally charged. All interpretations and conceptual connections presented here are derived from close reading and reflective analysis. This approach foregrounds female agency in legendary retellings as intentional and performative rather than incidental (Spivak, 1985, p. 9).

The analytical focus centers on Dopdi's acts of defiance and subaltern agency in Devi's *Draupadi*. Her refusal to cover her body after brutal violence constitutes a performative act, challenging patriarchal stigmatization and asserting control over her body while rejecting passive victimhood. Devi writes, "Dopdi did not cover herself...she looked straight at the officer with an unflinching gaze" (Devi, 1981, p. 384), demonstrating a refusal to submit to shame as imposed by male authority. In her final confrontation with Senanayak, Dopdi's unclothed and mutilated body destabilizes conventional power hierarchies, exposing the vulnerability of those in authority and subverting traditional gender norms.

Silence functions as a strategic mode of resistance. Dopdi's muteness upon capture preserves her agency and denies information to her captors, serving both rhetorical and political purposes. Spivak's analysis emphasizes this dynamic: "the figure of the woman disappears between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation...a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman" (Spivak, 1985, p. 83). Through Dopdi, Devi embodies the subaltern voice of the Santhal tribal community, highlighting perspectives marginalized by dominant discourses and official histories. Her active participation in the Naxalite movement, alongside her husband, demonstrates the intersection of gendered and political subalternity, illustrating the concept that subaltern resistance must often be enacted outside conventional legal or discursive frameworks. In *Draupadi*, silence operates not as a mark of submission but as a deliberate and strategic assertion of agency. Devi explicitly portrays Dopdi's refusal to cover herself after brutal assault as a performative challenge to patriarchal authority: "Dopdi did not cover herself...she looked straight at the officer with an unflinching gaze" (Devi, 1981, p. 384). This act confronts the imposed shame and transforms her body into a site of political resistance. Spivak underscores this subversion of patriarchal and state power: "the figure of the woman disappears between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation...a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman" (Spivak, 1985, p. 83). Dopdi's silence upon capture is similarly strategic. Devi narrates: "She remained mute, neither answering questions nor acknowledging their presence, her lips sealed as if words themselves were a trap" (Devi, 1981, p. 385). Silence, here, operates as both rhetorical and political resistance, denying the oppressors the control that verbal

compliance would afford. Beauvoir's assertion that "the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power if the respect or fear inspired by the woman prevents the use of violence towards her" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 212) resonates in this context: Dopdi's bodily defiance renders the ostensibly dominant male figure vulnerable. Moreover, her final confrontation with Senanayak exemplifies the collapse of authority through embodied resistance: "She lifted her body...showing the wounds, the disfigurement, the evidence of their brutality, yet her eyes blazed with challenge" (Devi, 1981, p. 386). By presenting her mutilated body unashamedly, Dopdi destabilizes the power hierarchy and shifts the moral burden onto the oppressor, turning shame into a tool of resistance. The narrative also foregrounds subaltern voice. Devi writes: "The tribal women whispered among themselves, watching Dopdi, finding courage in her stillness and anger" (Devi, 1981, p. 387). Here, silence and embodied resistance allow Dopdi to transmit agency to her community, aligning with Spivak's view that subaltern women's actions can articulate resistance even when conventional speech is denied (Spivak, 1985, p. 83).

The dominant literary assumption equating speech with agency fails to recognize culturally specific forms of resistance. Western frameworks often pathologize silence as passivity or internalized oppression (Anderson, 1991, p. 96). In contrast, Devi's narrative reconceptualizes silence as performative: "The officer waited for an answer; she gave none. Her silence was louder than any scream" (Devi, 1981, p. 385). This deliberate withholding of speech functions as a form of critique, forcing male authority to confront its own complicity. Dopdi's refusal to perform shame exemplifies the subversion of gendered norms: "Dopdi faced them, her body open, her eyes challenging, and yet untouched by fear" (Devi, 1981, p. 384). Silence here is intertwined with embodiment, creating a political discourse beyond words. Feminist theorists such as Divakaruni argue that in mythic retellings, women's silences convey anger, judgment, and desire, amplifying internal resistance into public assertion (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 152). Similarly, Kumkum Sangari observes that silence in South Asian contexts often encodes subversive intent, operating as a protective and political strategy (Sangari, 1990, p. 45). Devi further challenges patriarchal expectations through Dopdi's confrontation with Senanayak: "You think you have power? Look at yourself...look at what your violence has done" (Devi, 1981, p. 386). Here, voice is displaced from speech to bodily assertion; Dopdi's agency destabilizes male authority while revealing structural injustice. Spivak's observation that subaltern women exist in a space of "violent shuttling" between oppressive structures (Spivak, 1985, p. 83) is evident in Dopdi's embodiment of resistance, which navigates patriarchy, caste oppression, and state violence simultaneously. Through her muteness and embodied

defiance, Dopdi exemplifies a “counter-archive” of resistance, contesting dominant historical and social narratives (Spivak, 1985, p. 84). Silence and gesture thus operate as deliberate rhetorical interventions, creating a form of agency that transcends verbal articulation. The story demonstrates that in subaltern contexts, agency is performative, relational, and enacted through the body, rather than merely through speech.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* reconceptualizes female agency through embodied resistance and strategic silence, challenging the conventional conflation of voice with empowerment. Dopdi Mejhen’s refusal to cover her mutilated body and her deliberate muteness exemplify a performative defiance that destabilizes patriarchal and state authority, transforming her body into a site of political and ethical confrontation. As Devi narrates, “Dopdi did not cover herself...she looked straight at the officer with an unflinching gaze” (Devi, 1981, p. 384), a moment that epitomizes the transference of moral and psychological burden onto her oppressors. Spivak’s theory of the subaltern, highlighting the “violent shuttling” of women caught between patriarchy and imperialism (Spivak, 1985, p. 83), illuminates how Dopdi’s silence and corporeal assertion constitute deliberate acts of resistance within oppressive social, caste, and political structures.

Furthermore, Beauvoir’s insight that male physical superiority loses power in the face of a woman’s courage and presence (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 212) resonates in Dopdi’s confrontation with Senanayak, revealing that authority is contingent upon compliance and that its collapse can be enacted through refusal rather than violence. The narrative also foregrounds communal agency, as Dopdi’s defiance inspires other tribal women, creating a “counter-archive” of subaltern resistance (Spivak, 1985, p. 84). Devi’s retelling thus expands the interpretive possibilities of myth, showing that silence, gaze, posture, and refusal are potent modalities of subaltern expression. To conclude, *Draupadi* asserts that when conventional modes of voice are denied or rendered dangerous, agency persists through the body and through silence. Devi’s work challenges readers and scholars to reconceptualize resistance as performative, relational, and embodied, demonstrating that subaltern women can assert power even in the absence of speech. The story reaffirms the radical potential of mythic retellings in modern South Asian literature to critique structural inequities, destabilize entrenched hierarchies, and foreground the ethical and political stakes of embodied defiance.

References

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1949.

Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

Devi, Mahasweta. *Draupadi*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1981.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. HarperCollins, 2008.

Sangari, Kumkum. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kali for Women, 1990.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." *Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha, vol. 4, Oxford UP, 1985, pp. 83–109.

Nabar, Vrinda. *Cast(e) as Woman*. Penguin Books, 1995.