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# READING SUBALTERNITY: AN ACT OF RADICAL SELF-CRITIQUE

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## Abstract

In this paper, I take from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reading of subalternity as being contingent upon an act of radical self-critique – a critique of both our location, and our reading practices that attempt a top down translatability of the subaltern. As part of a vanguardist interpretive project a hubris informs our reading, foreclosing an unconditional criticism of our own compromised historical locations. For this, I take as reference the paralysing fear invoked by the "indomitable laughter" of the raped Dopdi Mejhen in Mahasweta Devi's, "Draupadi" as she confronts Senanayak and her captors, to explore it through a reading of Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa."

## Introduction

"Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society" (Devi, 2020b, p. xi)

Dopdi Mejhen was apprehended at 6:53 p.m. it took an hour to get her to camp. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8:57 Senanayak's dinner hour approached, and saying, *Make her. Do the needful*, he disappeared. (Devi, 2020a, p. 31)

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" opens with the citing of Santhal tribals, Dopdi Mejhen and her deceased husband Dulna's names in police records, as chief instigators in the murder of Surja Sahu. The killing of the landowner, money-lender had taken place during a particularly bad drought, when several tubewells, and wells had been dug and created for his sole use "No water anywhere, drought in Birbhum. Unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as a crow's eye" (Devi, 2020a, p. 26). The same Sahu had also, over the years, extracted free labour from Dulna against a small amount of paddy that his great grandfather had taken from his family's fields. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out "In modern 'India,' there is a 'society' of bonded labor, where the only means of repaying a loan at extortionate rates of interest is hereditary bond-slavery" (Spivak, 1989–1990, p. 111). After Sahu's killing and the failure of earlier attempts to capture the duo and bring the insurrection of the tribals and Naxals under control, "Operation Forest Jharkhani" is launched by the Special Forces. As part of the Operation, Dulna is killed and while Dopdi continues to be on the run, she is finally captured in the final section of the story, and brutally gang-raped multiple times through the night by her captors.

The order of terror unleashed against the dispossessed tribals runs chillingly through both Devi's fiction and her activist writings. In a conversation with Spivak—who has extensively translated her work and also engaged critically with it, Devi says, "The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel" (Devi, 2020b, p. 11). Spivak delineates this "parallel" as the rupture that challenges the prevailing logic of decolonisation. "The event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand between colony and decolonisation as an unexamined good that operates a reversal ... Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of

<sup>1</sup> Draupadi is the name given to her by the landlord Surja Sahu's wife, who named her thus, either out of indifference, or in mockery of the Mahabharata's polyandrous Draupadi. It is not a common name among tribals, and within a tribalised recall, it becomes Dopdi. Both versions of the name are used in the story. It is only after she is captured by Senanayak and his men that she is referenced as Draupadi. For purposes of this essay, I use "Dopdi", unless quoting from the story.



the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern*" (Spivak, 1989–1990, p. 106). In "Draupadi", "*Operation Jharkhand*" is alluded to as, "a carbuncle on the government's backside. Not to be cured by the tested ointment, not to burst with the appropriate herb" (Devi, 2020a, pp. 21–22). It is capable of offending, as Spivak says, "the pieties of the national bourgeoisie" (Spivak, 1989–1990, pp. 105–106), as the subproletariat's insertion—in this case that of the tribal—within the public imagination is seen as carrying a self-commissioned avowal to offend.

Taking this as my entry point, I will, in my paper, examine the re-displacement of the tribal that takes place through a pitting of Devi's Dopdi against the mythologised Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. I will elaborate this through Spivak's "Draupadi: Translator's Foreword" appended to the story, which forces us as readers to engage in an act of radical self-critique—of both our location and our reading practices. Finally, I will also look at the paralysing fear invoked by the "indomitable laughter" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33) of the raped Dopdi Mejhena as she confronts Senanayak and her captors, through a reading of Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa."

### The Script of Nationhood and the Unmarked Tribal

Early in Devi's story, Dopdi and her husband Dulna are hounded by the state commissioned Special Forces, led by Arjan Singh—the martial Sikh strategist, padded by the prosthetic phallic masculinity of his gun. And yet, Arjan Singh early in the story, is frightened into a forced retirement—aggravated by a convulsive Conradian horror when he learns of the tribal couple Dopdi and Dulna, ululating to life from a presumed death: "Arjan Singh fell for a bit into a *zombie*-like state and finally acquired so irrational a dread of black-skinned people that whenever he saw a black person in a ball-bag, he swooned saying 'they're killing me', and drank and passed a lot of water. Neither uniform nor Scriptures could relieve that depression" (Devi, 2020a, p. 18). His premature departure is followed by the entry of the elderly, bespectacled Bengali, Senanayak, "*specialist* in combat and extreme Left-politics" (Devi, 2020a, p. 18). The radical difference between their strategies is created through a contrast between the gun-wielding Singh and the bookish Senanayak. Before delineating Senanayak's role, I would like to look at the figure of the tribal and also trace the aporias of decolonisation that Devi's writing locates the tribal through.

According to Spivak, "Mahasweta Devi lingers in postcoloniality in the space of difference, *in decolonised terrain*. Her material is not written with an international audience in mind. It often contains problematic representations of decolonisation" (Spivak, 1989–1990, p. 105). The project of nation-building rests predictably on the shedding of liminal spaces that defy the script of nationhood and national cohesiveness. Allowing for the conventional evocation of 'unity in diversity', for "this somewhat tired slogan is, quite understandably, still on the agenda of the 'builders of the nation,' even as the consumer elite is being constituted as the definitive citizen. As she inscribes this other dis-placed space, Mahasweta appropriates and transforms this worthy generalisation by positing a unity in exploitation and domination" (Spivak, 1989–1990, p. 109). In order for the state's developmentalist model to succeed, the exploited tribal is written out of history—and tribal rebellions against the state cited as a splitting of the nation—with the tribal as the enemy within, who has to be hunted, and brought to order. According to Prathama Banerjee, "It is precisely because the discipline of history refuses to fully admit the 'tribe' into its own time that it returns to haunt history as the ultimate political agent" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 125).

### Antedating the Mythologised Draupadi

Within recent global recognition of the aborigines/tribals as first nations, or pre-nation, lies an important acknowledgement that allows for a reinstating of their primacy within both landed geographies and historiography—as against the discourse of 'unevolved primality' that has historically been responsible



...marginalising. For Mahasweta Devi, "the dark tribal was the first child of dark India. The rest followed. But they snatched everything from the tribal and shared it among themselves. That was the beginning of a process of deprivation that has continued relentlessly" (Devi, 1990, p. 118). In the use of "dark" both for India and for the tribal, lies Devi's calculated recall of a pre-Aryan history and belonging—a belonging subsequently displaced by the Aryan invasion, that brought with it restructured, self-aggrandising hierarchies. In fact, Devi's story stresses the indistinguishability of the dark Santhals from the Neanderthal forested darkness that has been their ancestral home: "The Special Forces, attempting to pierce that dark by an armed search, compelled quite a few Santhals in the various districts of West Bengal to meet their Maker against their will. By the Indian Constitution all human beings, regardless of caste or creed, are sacred. Still, accidents like this do happen" (Devi, 2020a, p. 17). The reasons egregiously cited for the "accidents" are not just Dopdi and Dulna's skilled self-concealment, but the inability of the Special Forces to distinguish between the tribals—a lack that is sought to be compensated by a disingenuous citing of the Indian Constitution's granting of a non-discriminatory equality to all.

Further, locating the tribal or aborigine through its etymology "ab-origine," that which precedes the original, Santhal Dopdi is read as standing prior to the mythologised Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>ii</sup> In Devi's story, the vernacularisation of her name is a de-Sanskritisation of the Brahminical epic. "Moving from the tribal to the Sanskritic registers" (Spivak, 1989–1990, p. 106), the story locates a palimpsestic overture that urges the reader towards Dopdi, the original source, on whose absence and erasure the mythological Draupadi is constructed. Dopdi then is what exists in place of the absent proper name, the permanent other, effaced to make place for a different taxonomy of being and naming. Undoing mythology's origins and its accepted primacy, allows the reader to reassess its a-priori stature, one that has granted it an unequivocal historical priority. Deep within this reassessed acknowledgement lies also, an undoing of our imagination of the world and its mythic origins—one that has been Hinduised to displace older traditions.

### **The Un-constituted, Naked Body**

After the repeated violence of multiple rapes upon her body, "Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33), Dopdi tears off the single piece of cloth thrown at her by the guards for her to cover herself: "Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, She's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly" (Devi, 2020a, p. 32). Dopdi's lack of shame is incomprehensible to the guards, as she walks towards Senanayak, baring her mauled, raped, naked body. In rejecting the last piece of clothing that would have hidden her nakedness, Dopdi marks her difference from the infinitely clothed Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, who had been saved from a public disrobing by divine intervention. Here in Mahasweta Devi's story, she is Comrade Dopdi, the internationalist, part of the Naxal movement, standing in terrifying power over her captors—and also standing apart from the mythologised Draupadi.

The story's final episode describes Senanayak's shock on seeing "Draupadi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her held high" (Devi, 2020a, p. 32). In Dopdi's assertion of her unclothed, raped body in the face of her captors, a return to the naked body is signified—and in that, a return to a pre-social as it were. In this lies the naked body's enactment of the pre-constituted body, one that is prior to the forging of the nation and its Constitution. As the Santhal tribal, Dopdi the ab-origine, stands in towering 'precedence' over the nation and its conceptualising of borders and boundedness. However, in this, she also

ii In my paper, I use the term tribal, in place of adivasi, as used by Spivak, who I have elaborated my reading of the story through. 'Adivasi' is etymologically drawn from adi-vasi denoting first dwellers, and in that akin to the word 'aborigine' and its roots.



remains outside the script of nationhood that accounts for the value of the body only through normative ideas of belonging and citizenship. The nation-state and its Constitution – drafted as the guarantor of rights—does not recognise what lies outside of it. Here Dopdi, as tribal, is deemed a non-subject, denied the rights that inviolably accrue to the constituted body. In this, does the tribal's non-mainstreaming, her un-constitutedness, also strip her fundamentally of her right to rights? Is the raped body of Dopdi, always, already inscribed within the right-less body? If this is what is suggested, then it also allows for other bodies to be unrestrainedly set upon it for a colonising of its location and eventual takeover—as is the case with the mythologised Draupadi, whose insertion within a scriptural telling allows for the effacement of the tribal's story and its telling.

### Can the Subaltern Be “Read”?

The mythological Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* stands as a comment on how histories are erased and overwritten, rendered insignificant, unintelligible—seen in the necessary subalternisation of Dopdi in the story. Yet, the text of Devi's story is not a denunciation of the more powerful, mythologised signification. What is critically significant to this paper, is how Dopdi's story forces our attention on our own complicity in structures that have made the subaltern inaudible—even as reading Devi's “Draupadi” cannot be about making the tribal subaltern, into a readable object, transparent and translatable. Dopdi will defy that ‘making’ and the “Make her. *Do the needful*” (Devi, 2020a, 31), as ordered by Senanayak, will stand rescinded, bearing the weight of its own impossibility.

In this, as Spivak says, Devi's story forces us to confront our own reading strategies, our attempts and tactics at translating the subaltern into intelligibility. If the experience of the literature classroom is projected as an exercise at making the literary text a window to the world, one that will transport the reader to a different time and place—conversely what we in turn encounter, is the text of the subaltern that resists meaning. As readers, we are left to wrestle with it, while being forced into acknowledging the impossibility of exhausting meaning from it— as we attempt to render it legible and intelligible for our reading experience. Reading as an act of translation, resists the throwing up of synonyms and metaphors from our own experiences to be read through in the textual experience of the subaltern. As scholars, readers, critics, we are complicit and implicated in those very structures of intelligibility/legibility that are themselves biased, lopsided, top-down—and therefore, we need to be made aware of, and also made to question those structures that make a text out of the subaltern. Every encounter with the subaltern has to be through this ethical awareness, for the act of reading cannot be about arriving or transfixing the subaltern through the production of saviour narratives.

It is this same failed intellectualised expertise, the methodological objectivity, through which Senanayak aims at becoming the other. “*In order to destroy the enemy, become one*” (Devi, 2020a, p. 19). Detached and dilettantish, he reorders readings through a self-constructed negative capability—creating subtler forms of surveillance that can escape recognition. But, as Spivak says in “Draupadi: Translator's Foreword”, “pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society” (Spivak, 2020, p. 1) and “[t]hus his emotions at Dopdi's capture are mixed: sorrow (theory) and joy (practice). Correspondingly, we grieve for our Third-World sisters; we grieve and rejoice that they must lose themselves and become as much like us as possible in order to be ‘free’; we congratulate ourselves on our specialists' knowledge of them. Indeed, like ours, Senanayak's project is interpretive: he looks to decipher Draupadi's song” (Spivak, 2020, pp. 1–2) by studying and knowing “the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do” (Spivak, 2020, p. 18). He has plans of writing a book which will highlight the message of the harvest workers—riding on this hubris, he believes he has, “understood them by (*theoretically*) becoming one of them” (Spivak, 2020, p. 19).



... Senanayak's performativity of self-reflexivity, the will to be the learned scholar, wielding the anti-paperback of 'The Deputy,' dreaming of writing his own book—that is finally forced to encounter her terrifying nakedness: "What more can you do? Come on, *know* me—come on, *know* me!" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). As the supreme intellectual aesthete, Senanayak knows how to marshal uncertainties, hesitations, and doubts—while remaining emotionally detached and objective. It is the negative capability that requires the aesthete to be artistic, receptive, even if it comes at the cost of morality—for beauty and depth make morality irrelevant, in this forsaking of the ethical for the aesthetic. Senanayak's strategy is anthropological, it is the will to know, catalogue, document, render visible—to be able to "apprehend", not just catch, but also "know"—whereas for the tribal, the important strategy is in creating the unknowable, that which would thwart the surveilling state.

In this, Senanayak is a comment on our reading practices, alerting us to the ways in which the subaltern has been textualised, turned into an object to be read and translated. It comes from the same hubris that populates our classrooms as we attempt to read the text of subalternity through a vanguardist interpretive act—without an unconditional criticism of our own compromised historical locations. With this, Devi's story highlights not just the grievous omissions of the state, or pedagogically the elite First-World scholar, but marks us—readers and teachers, within metropolitan classrooms, aiming to teach and translate the subaltern into a language that we understand, by making her into an image of ourselves. In Dopdi's pushing of her mangled body on Senanayak, is the subaltern becoming the force of contingency for the teacher/scholar who thinks that there are specific methodological strategies that can be applied to a reading of the subaltern. In this, we are all Senanayaks, and the subaltern as text will leap and surprise us, mock us into a confrontation of our own complicities and the cognitive processes that we identify with, and use for translating the subaltern. As Spivak reminds us, this "is the tragedy of the trivialisation of the humanities, a kind of cultural death" (Spivak, 2012, p. 288).

In "Draupadi: Translator's Foreword," Spivak alerts us into ethically understanding our own reading of the subaltern, into becoming acutely aware of the aporias of textual translation that thwart intelligibility. The story allows for an act of radical self-critique—and that is precisely why we need to read Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," give it voice within the syllabus, for to leave generations of students oblivious to even this acknowledgement of the appropriation of the subaltern's speech, will forever impoverish our classroom, and unjustly serve our discipline.

### Women's Indomitable Laughter

In my last section, I would like to look at the ending of the story, and Dopdi's "indomitable laughter" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33) that brings it to a close. In Senanayak's 'theorising' that the story introduces him through, his reading and his intellectualising takes the place of the state's panoptic desire, engaged in seeing, knowing and learning about the tribals: "Senanayak is not to be trifled with. Whatever his practice, in theory he respects the opposition" (Devi, 2020a, p. 19). He wants to interpret Dopdi's song; he wants her "apprehension and elimination" (Devi, 2020a, p. 20) through a strategic bookish engagement. Unlike Arjan Singh, Senanayak's own progressive, ethical pretensions stop him from sullyng his hands with the torture of the captured fugitive, and thus, after her successfully orchestrated capture, her 'apprehending', he leaves with the laconic command to his men to "make her" (Devi, 2020a, p. 31).

Dopdi emerges hours later 'made' and 'remade' by his men—her mutilated body an index of their brutality. Her head held high, she refuses the piece of cloth thrown at her. Her naked body and her willed assertion of remaining unclothed, startles Senanayak—terrifying him through its absolute unknowability. As Spivak says in her Foreword, this is the point where "male leadership stops" (Spivak, 2020, p. 10)—unable



comprehend or articulate what confronts it: "Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). Stripped of all coverings of cloth, Dopdi's nakedness confronts him, mocking him—defying readability: "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?" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). Dopdi asserts the power of signification over her own body, thwarting patriarchal dictum and the social script of shame that overwrites the naked female body. With this, her body emerges no longer contained within known codes of femininity—becoming here, the frightening body, what Spivak calls the terrifying "superobject": "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,' who, still using the language of sexual 'honor,' can derisively call herself 'the object of your search,' whom the author can describe as a terrifying superobject—'an unarmed target'" (Spivak, 2020, p. 11). Senanayak, the man standing in for the powerful state, is confounded—the naked unclothed body has escaped all gendered covering, challenging the state's imagination of how gender should be performed. Both his bookish knowledge and intellectual expertise lie thwarted, and he is forced to confront and "kounter" the subaltern body no longer encoded and folded into discourse: "Draupadi shakes with indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). Defying the scopic fetish, Dopdi declares her naked body, unknowable and beyond the uncomprehending, interpretive gaze of Senanayak—and in wresting control and refusing the self-evident testimony of the victim, she is able to script a new testimony as agent.

It is Dopdi's Medusan laughter, her "indomitable laugh" that resonates and transfixes Senanayak into a terrified paralysis—through a potential that frightens, yet eludes him: "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). As the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons, Medusa's expunged and overwritten pre-Olympian history had originally represented women's power and wisdom. In the case of her eponymous gaze, it was not the horror of the object looked at, the coiled serpent head, which petrified the onlooker—but the fact that their eyes met those of Medusa looking at them.

In "The Laugh of Medusa" Hélène Cixous conceptualises 'écriture féminine' as the woman writing her body, performing an interrogation of the phallogocentric structures of language: "An act which will not only 'realise' the decensored relation of woman to her ...[and] to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 880). The polyvalent semantics of Medusan laughter offer a feminist strategy of articulation, producing a challenge to phallogocentric knowledge creation and its erasure of women by opening space for them to become powerful, knowing subjects, not passivised objects of enquiry. "Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 877).

Cixous also invokes her dark African sisters, and the forced fear of darkness that is hegemonised and internalised: "because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. Most of all, don't go into the forest" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, pp. 877–878). The Neanderthal darkness of the forest is also the tribal, dark-skinned Draupadi's home—a home from where the state makes every attempt to remove and displace her—mainstream her out of a forested savagery, as it were. Cixous speaks of the repression of the woman, kept in the dark, hidden from herself, under the readability of the general, 'typical' woman—one that denies her infinite richness, her individual constitutedness, the vertiginous economy of her



It is also a capitalist phallogentrism that fears the woman, "Smug faced readers, managing editors, and critics don't like the women-female-sexed texts. That kind scares them" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 881). A masculine readerly thrift and intent are incapable of reading her excess, her ebullience - while an attempt is made to control and organise her profligacies. Furthermore Cixous says, for the woman as militant, when she is a part of struggles that take on different forms of repression, "she will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 882) and "[w]hen the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering turn, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 886). This is also Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi - who refuses the disciplinary power of recurring violence by inserting, and speaking with her formidable naked body, using it to expose the failures of the masculinist nation state. Both Dopdi's body and her laughter are the Cixousian transgressive force, necessary for resisting the violence done to the body of the woman.

Dopdi, the subaltern woman, escapes all theoretical, linear transcribing, defying readings that attempt to draw her into an empirically circumscribed history - stupefying Senanayak with her indomitable laughter. Her nakedness, Devi's Dopdi resists and "counters" male knowledge - challenging it through her frightening tolerance, "*kounter me*" (Devi, 2020a, p. 33). As Cixous says of the woman writing herself,

She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materialises what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body... Her speech, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectified,' generalised: she draws her story into history. (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 881)

## Conclusion

In the reading and teaching of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" is thus an urgency- for it makes space not just for a de-transcendentalising of the nation-state through a non-nostalgic, deromanticising of the tribal subaltern whose indomitable Medusan laughter substantiates a radical narrative formation, but also pushes for self-criticality that our reading practices need to be mediated through. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak writes: '[I] think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective in the long run' (1999, p. 309). As an approach, this also negates a vanguardism that proclaims that the humanities alone can save the world. As Spivak cautions,

Higher education in the humanities should be strengthened so that the literary imagination can continue to de-transcendentalise the nation and shore up the redistributive powers of the regionalist state in the face of global priorities. Imagine this, please, for a new world around the corner, is less likely than ever today. (Spivak, 2012, p. 293)

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