

THE APOLLONIAN

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (Online, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed)

Vol. 1, Issue 2 (December 2014) || ISSN 2393-9001

Chief Editor: Girindra Narayan Roy

Editors: Subashish Bhattacharjee & Saikat Guha

Feature—*Twentieth Century Women's Writing*

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Navigation of the Tribal Self across Democratic and Insurgent
Subject Positions: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"
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Rupsa Banerjee

The English and Foreign Languages University, India

The tendentious logic of self-presentation in language negotiates the inescapable gap between one's political and social being. The discomfiture between the self's dualistic representations as a social and political subject is navigated in myriad ways by the processes of language. The politics of identity that comes to be emplaced in and through language allows for the creation of two distinct categories; one that faces a less than ordinary kind of politicization and the other where being within the category entails an absolute form of correspondence between "the social subject which has undergone its politicization, and the relatively impersonal subject moving as a figure in the sphere of politics". (Riley 5) The latter form of categorical identification is clearly seen in respect to the formation of the "ethnic" identity where the subject of language becomes coterminous with the subject of politics.

In this article I take two texts which can adequately help critique the functioning of such categories and ask what is really at stake in the creation of the political subject (a category which Ranabir Samaddar details can neither be captured by the term citizen, nor by the evocation of the term 'political subject'). What complicates this process further is the fact that it is the gendered political subject whose agency is held out for scrutinization. The texts chosen attempt to mitigate the blur between the intensely personal subject and the impersonal nature of its political representation.

The limits of symbolic intelligibility that is set around being a woman is conflated with the failure to regulate and rearticulate tribal identity within the dominant discourses of nation-state and gendered identity. The manner in which one comes to understand the politics of adivasi consciousness is through carefully

studying the processes through which adivasi consciousness navigates itself through the notions of self-rule and the dominant discourses of prevalent nationalism. Alongside this, the body of the female adivasi is contextualized through various different identificatory processes that emphasize the 'sexed' materiality of the body. Through a reading of the texts that I have selected (Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and C. K. Janu's *Mother Forest*), one a structuring of the adivasi past by the elite and the second, a conceptualization of the adivasi present in conjunction with its past and probable future by a native we can at once begin to question the processes at work in emplacing the political and the social subject. On the one hand there is an attempt to study the politicized adivasi identity negotiating its insurgent and democratic subject positions, generating a hybridity that straddles both indigenous and international contexts and on the other there is an engagement with the ways in which the contoured materiality of the social subject comes into being within the processes of language.

These texts therefore look at the construction of a tribal female identity placed within the contentious world of politics. One line of enquiry will be studying the linguistic and narrative conditions that enable the emergence of such a subject. And on the other there will be an attempt to analyze the nature of the bond between the materiality of language and the ontic materiality of the political subject; the political subject whose emergence according to Ranabir Samaddar brings about an active engagement with both 'situations' and 'positions':

[the political subject] emerges not through discourses, or the ideological thought of a great philosopher, or even by some sacred text called the Constitution, but as a result of certain conjuncture of conflicting circumstances. 'Situations' create 'positions'. In discussing the political subject we are discussing both situations and positions. (Samaddar xix)

Perhaps one way in which we can come to theorize the split between the 'situation' and 'position' of the political subject is by identifying the fundamental dehiscence inherent in the institution of political reality in itself. As Yannis Stavrakakis would say:

[...] the institution of political reality presupposes a certain repression of the constitutivity of the political. It entails an impossible attempt to erase the political ontology of the social. (Stavrakakis 72)

Both the texts talk of the paradoxical nature of the political which stresses upon the ways in which the social is dislocated and subverted. In the texts there is a constant interplay between the political/ ethnic self's constant struggle to *become*

while countering the constitutional inefficacy of the social self's ability to fully *be*. The naked body of Dopdi frightening the police general and the female body of the tribals of Adiyar community in Kerala labouring more than their male counterparts and being beaten by the police equally if not more by the police during protests¹ are examples of instances wherein "the ontological impossibility of the real affects socio-political reality" (Stavrakakis 75). It is this realm of dislocated existence that they share, away from the plane of symbolic reality that allows for the apprehension of the Lacanian real:

[an] ontological horizon of every play between political articulation and dislocation, order and disorder, politics and the political" (Stavrakakis 75).

The reason why the ethnic nature of the characters needs to be pointed out is because 'ethnicity' marks a permanent fault-line between society and politics in India, where the complex heterogeneity of society leads to the collusion of categories such as the 'regional' and the 'ethnic' and gives rise to a wide spectrum of identities revolving around the markers of religion, territory, language etc. Within such fluid and unstable politico-cultural milieus, ethnicity and identity as the critic Daniel Rycroft says, assume important discursive characteristics. The discursive nature of these categories actually helps to generate a narrative that works across the multiple registers of ethnicity, regionality, nationality and transnationality. The metonymic displacement of meaning, an inevitable part of the process of signification is quite literally splayed out for scrutiny in this formation of adivasi identity. It in itself can therefore be seen as an allegory for the factors inherent in the 'constructedness'² of identity, whether it be social or political.

The manner in which one can come to understand the politics of adivasi consciousness is by studying the processes through which adivasi consciousness navigates itself through the notions of self-rule and the dominant discourses of prevalent nationalism. Mahasweta Devi's story *Draupadi* brings to the forefront the problems of placing the tribal across the logic of equivalence, according to Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization³, where, it is deemed to be the 'other' or the binary opposite of the nationalist self. According to this logic of equivalence, the political struggle of the tribals comes to take on cataclysmic proportions as the world comes to be divided into two paratactical chains of equivalences, the world of the tribals as opposed to the world of the nation-state. Mahasweta Devi in her story works very diligently to present this binary between the tribals' denotified self and the state and at the same time subverts it. Draupadi/Dopdi's tribal self resists the constrictions of Senanayak's elite knowledge system.

To understand the state of Dopdi, it is important to take into account the fact that Dopdi exists outside of the boundaries of elite understanding. This fluidness of Dopdi's identity is in accordance with the identity of the tribals where the tribals themselves, denotified by the Indian government (that is, rendering 'non-criminal' of the tribes who were deemed criminal following the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871) symbolize a break of the continuity between man and citizen. The 'denotification' or rendering 'non-criminal' of the tribes although originally undertaken by the Indian government post-independence to ensure law and order for the tribal community only became a devious way through which the people in power could ensure cheap labour. Mahasweta Devi in her story mentions that Dopdi Mejhen belongs to the tribe of the Santhals who are "not to be confused with at least nine other Munda tribes that inhabit India" (Spivak 14). The Santhals of the Santhal Parganas were deemed as denotified by the Indian government and Dopdi and her mate 'Dulna' invariably are a part of them. Their identity as human beings come to be overridden by the fact that they are 'denotified' tribals, whose political existence is determined not in terms of the land they possess or the language they speak but in terms of their hereditary lineage.

To understand the situation of the tribals and the possibilities of their carving out a niche for themselves in society, we must first understand the concept of sovereignty as put forward by Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. According to Agamben, 'the principle of sovereignty' lies solely with the nation, as the nation is what grants us our natural rights. According to Agamben, the formation of the Foucauldian 'biopolitic' is not simply a mere inclusion of the "bare natural life" into the political to be further utilized by the state as 'bio-power'. For him, there is an irreducible distinction between the technologies of the self and the political techniques. The individual from the very moment of his birth is identified as the citizen and is then invested with the principle of sovereignty, without taking into account the fact that he is a 'free and conscious political subject'.

However, for Foucault, sovereign power is blind and weak, its inefficacy being completely grounded in its ontological nature. This is something that Foucault develops to emphasize on the idea that the vantage point through which sovereignty is reinstated does not occur through the side of the power but is actually something that comes into effect through the side of the citizens who constitute the social body. Thus, we find that it is through the active redefining of the threshold of life that the citizens get to build up a resistance to the strictures of power. To quote Foucault himself in this regard, "So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to

the other forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change to change with the resistance" (qtd. in da Costa and Philip 311) This is something that is treated in Mahasweta Devi's story. The forms of resistance to the bludgeoning of the army general, Senanayak's elite intelligence is many. The fact that power works through establishing a power-relation through language is something that has been proved time and again. Senanayak's inability to fathom the jubilant war songs of Dopdi and her husband Dulna shows that they abscond from the knowledge structures of the elite. Also, Dopdi's valiant and passionate 'ululation', foregrounds the willed affiliations of her individuated self which refuses to be inscribed within the structures of 'political' language. The fluidity of Dopdi's character is again made apparent by the fact that she rejects the name given to her by the landlord Surja Sahu. Her rejection of the 'elite' name given to her by him is at once a rejection of patriarchy as well as a rejection of the elite mechanisms that seek to identify and locate her within known paradigms. In Devi's story, the ruthless repressive powers of the police create a violence that calls into question the very 'naturalness' of being human. According to Agamben, it is because politics in our age has been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree 'unknown'. The politicization of natural is very significant as we find that modern politics comes into existence through the "innate symbiosis" with "bare life". This is revelatory of the fact that there is no way to keep the physical body separate from the body of the nation-state. It is because of this that we find that the body of Draupadi come to be imbued with so many political significances. Being the body of a tribal woman, belonging to a section of society that has been denotified by law, Draupadi's body allows for the assault made by the militants. Her body is as much denotified as is her caste and position in society. The dislocatory events of political violence help to foreground the fact that man is not simply a natural body but also a body that is political; a fact which otherwise is necessarily obfuscated by the very mode of the institution of the political.

It is the adivasi nature of Dopdi's body that allows for the revelation of the empty locus of politics around which our society is ordered. The text also foregrounds the problematic of identifying the individual with his body within the symbolic set of relations that configure the tribal identity. Identification of the individual with his body is the very reason why laws such as the *habeas corpus* become so important in the context of democracy; where the bare fact of the possession of the body becomes a criterion for the suspension of law. What is ironical in the case of the tribals is the fact that their very body becomes a site for the state's coercive power. However as Giorgio Agamben explicates, the Corpus is after-

all a “two-faced being”, “the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties” (Neal 83). Dopdi’s tribal identity is inscribed within her body and assault over her body becomes synonymous with the attack over the entire tribal community. However, because Dopdi refuses to garb herself when presented before the general Senanayak that we find that the body’s practices becomes an active site for the re-negotiation of power structures.

In the story, we find that there is also a dismantling of the rigid binaries the male and the female. Dopdi, the woman leader of the tribals wielding authority and power tries to embody the phallic figure and thus institutes the castration complex in the police officers. She no longer comes across as the woman but emerges as the “symptom of man”, the point through which the stability and efficacy of masculinity is threatened. Dopdi is unlike her counterpart in the *Mahabharata*. In the previous text, as Spivak says, Draupadi gets written into the “patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power”. However, in Mahasweta’s story we find that Dopdi cannot be inscribed into the structure of patriarchy. Stripping herself naked wilfully in front of the general Senanayak, Dopdi actually represents the position where male leadership and for that matter the state’s power over the tribal’s comes to a halt. It is when Dopdi moves into the threshold of being a woman, by being subjected to an act that assaults her womanhood, that Dopdi emerge as someone who is far more powerful as opposed to the general Senanayak. It is because of this reason that Mahasweta Devi says that at that instance of the confrontation between Dopdi and Senanayak, the general was rendered “terribly afraid” of an “unarmed target”.

The reason of the general’s fear holds within itself the absurdity of the tribal situation in India. The fear of Senanayak does not emerge from viewing the battered body of a woman. The fear emerges from his realisation of the fact that Dopdi’s body is that *limit concept* which radically calls into question the fundamental categories of man-woman, tribal-elite etc. She occupies such a space, which is not wholly subjected to the biopolitical paradigms. Her body is not simply the palimpsest or the screen on which the order of knowledge can be read. Hers is a palimpsest as well as a contradiction. The way in which Dopdi relates to her body and uses it to become a subject of unique capacities is completely different from the way in which Senanayak relates to her. This functioning is parallel to the inchoate nature of the tribal’s body of knowledge; an entity that alludes the categorising and contesting forces of elite knowledge. And we soon come to realize that the unique capacity of resistance in the tribal, is constituted not through the essential interiority of

'tribalness', but is in actuality instituted through the relations that the tribal body shares with the outside.

To understand the relation that the tribal self shares we need to locate the ways in which the 'spatialization' of the tribal identity takes place. The spatial understanding of inhabiting a space is very different from our physical understanding of it; to the extent that phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty would argue that in our very act of occupying a space we invariably come to be occupied by it as well. Space in this case is not to be equated with physical 'place' but is to be seen as an entity that travels past the frangible, Cartesian boundaries placed around it and translates to the conceptual category of the 'spatial'. It no longer remains an objective, parochial, empiricist construct but becomes a close-knit network of human affective relations grounded in various socio-economic dependencies. Space thus constituted consequently effects influence on individuals who come to be constituted through the relations that they share with their spatial surroundings. It is because of this reason that there takes place a 'spatialization' of being, where the individual no longer remains the concrete subject of history. The processes through which the individuals come to negotiate their surroundings are something that renders their being unintelligible.

Within the tribal context however this very 'spatialization of being' is impossible. The reason for this is the fact that their identity comes to be solely dependent upon the geographical boundaries that they occupy. The ironical part here, being the fact that the land that they are commonly associated with is something of which they are commonly dispossessed of by the government. Thus, we find that there is a fundamental split within this line of signification. It is because the identity of the tribals is trapped within one particular discourse that we find that it is difficult for them to form a coherent sense of themselves. Also, for the tribals, their sense of identity gets installed not through the 'material practices' but through the acts of violence that are implemented to govern them. These acts of violence come to be directed at the very social base of the tribal societies, through acts of rape, murder, mutilation. It is because of this reason that we find the usual notions of the formation of the self is not applicable for the tribals. It is because their repertoires of conduct are bounded by the enclosure that is formed by the human skin that we cannot say that the tribal identity is formed through the multiplicity of places and practices. Ranabir Samaddar's comment on the materiality of politics appears to be quite befitting in this regard:

Not 'bare life', not even 'naked life', but 'bare bodies' inhabit this politics; and 'bare body' expresses only one aspect of this physicality of the political process. This process is so violent and contentious, that either the sovereign power suffers the spectre of bare bodies everywhere and therefore takes exceptional measures to cleanse politics of bare bodies, or it requires and creates a juridical structure to clothe politics effectively so that politics have little marks of bare bodies. (Samaddar xviii)

The process through which Draupadi resists the domination of Senanayak is not something that is completely 'arbitrary' and 'free'. Instead there is an enfolding of the abstract 'discontinuity' of the singular act of resistance into the equally abstract 'purposiveness' of all historical acts aimed at producing change. Taking this into consideration, we find that both Mahasweta Devi's story and C. K. Janu's *Mother Forest* suggests ways in which the tribal self can work through this interiority and allow for an epistemic unsettlement of the categories of patriarchy and ruthless nationalist-imperialism.

In Mahasweta Devi's story, the police assault that takes place on Dopdi's body is taken to be an attack on the tribal body as a whole, and that is precisely why it is so violent. For the tribals we cannot say that the interior and the exterior space come to be diffused through practices, as the interiority of their selves is maintained quite rigidly by the government. However, within the space of the story, we find that the succumbing of Senanayak (the leader of the police force) at the sight of Dopdi's 'made up' body (in other words the body ravaged by police men) shows a final acceptance of her tribal being as the limit-concept that leads to the destabilization of the binaries of the tribal and the elite self, the tribal body and the body of the state. Thus, we find that although throughout the story, Dopdi occupies the insurgent subject position, yet at the end there comes to be a collation of her democratic and insurgent selves, leading to the bafflement of the police leader.

In C. K. Janu's *Mother Forest*, we find the author grappling with similar issues that plague the formation of an adivasi identity, mainly, that of an insurgent subject placed across the logic of equivalence and that of a probable citizen with claims to participation in the national/global political economy. C. K. Janu's autobiographical account of her life gives us more detailed accounts into the problematics of the tribals' spatialization of self. Although critics like Daniel Rycroft expound the belief that the new adivasi discourse of the present postcolonial India actually brings about a confluence of the notions of "transnational indigeneity" and 'regional assertiveness', however, I feel that though there has been a loosening of the

constrictions surrounding the minority 'paradigm', yet there is considerable difficulty surrounding the mobilization of adivasi identity across the state/democratic and popular/insurgent spaces. It is this difficulty that is foregrounded in C. K. Janu's narrative. Although government policies and leadership has gone a long way in significantly improving the way of life for the people in Kerala, yet very little has been done with regard to the way of life of the tribals, existing in pockets throughout the state. The way of life of the adivasis/tribals has been endangered due to the onslaught of modernity, and Janu's narrative helps capture the contradictions inherent in juxtaposing adivasi autonomy (characterised through their specific body of knowledge surrounding their land and 'insurgent' will to defend it) and national autonomy (characterised through the internalization of notions such as secularism and citizenship).

In C. K. Janu's story, we find that the entire discourse of nationalism is crafted around certain *points du capitons*⁴ or empty signifiers that hold the entire discourse in place; for example the circulation of calendars among the tribals with the pictures of hindu gods and goddesses and leaders of the nationalist movement (with the tribals being equally in the dark about the identity of both), or the attempt to preach democracy and equal development, when the actual interest of the political party remained merely in generating a vote bank. Janu's story and the manner in which it documents the state government's functions to thwart the 'political' and 'cultural' aspirations of the tribals is telling of the fact that the democratic subject position occupied by the so-called tribal activists remains only a tiny part of the tribal identity. Although there are significant attempts made to encourage the tribal to internalize his democratic self, for example providing schooling and allowing them to participate in competitive exams, yet for the most part it remains unsuccessful as the tribals are unable to come to terms with the material practices seeking to dissolve the bond that they have with their land.

The spatialization of the tribal self is unable to formulate itself across the different matrices present in society because the tribal identity is never fully able to get rid of its metaphoric associations and disentangle itself across various metonymic registers. Although the nation aspires to absorb all the social divisions and create a society that encompasses all kinds of differences and demands, yet the tribal identity sticks out as a sore thumb in this deeply metonymic political logic. The violence against the tribals (the same violence that comes to form the decisive factor in both the narratives) shows that for the tribals, it is their denotified selves that form

both the site of oppression and resistance. It is the violence directed towards the body that comes to form the determining factor in the tribals' quest for autonomy.

Within the course of the narrative there are many instances that detail the ways in which the female tribal body is subjected to the normativizing patterns of law structures in society. The tribal female body used to only covering their busts with pieces of cloth called 'chela' is now subjected to civilized styles of dressing. C. K. Janu details:

They took our girls saying they wanted to educate them, and put them into hostels where the very people responsible for them misused them for power and money. Their greedy, fear-inspiring, powerful hands forced our girls into doing wrong things. [...] The way they spoke and the way they behaved became a matter of shame and degeneration. The way they dressed invited lewd comments. (49)

We find that the functioning of regulatory law and the compulsory identification on part of the tribals with their normative demands leads to the creation of a self that is at odds with the conditions of lived experience for the tribal community. Repeatedly throughout the narrative Janu hints at the fact that the feminine principle is predominant in the forest inhabitants, that it is the women who take more responsibility than the men. Characters such as Laxmi, Valli are delineated as friends of the narrator and therefore accomplices in shaping a community where materiality and femininity merge to counter the dominant discourse.

The functioning of law in Devi's story also reveals the fundamental split between the social identity of the subject and its political counterpart. The function of the police conflates within itself the two types of violence, the 'founding-violence' of law, violence required for the origination of law, and 'preserving-violence', the violence necessary for the preservation of law. As Derrida says, the state is afraid of "founding violence", violence that is able to "justify, to legitimate and transform the relations of Law" (Derrida 268). The reason why violence plays such a destabilizing role is because violence is not something that exists external to law, but is actually something that "threatens law from within law." The fact of the matter is that because the state accords the right to free expression, the right to stand up for the preservation of one's rights (through violence if need be) that it leads to the possibilities of destroying a given order of law through the exercise of violence. Dopdi's act of killing the village landlord Surja Sahu is not something that exists

outside the law. It is an exercise of violence to stress the need for law, the right to law.

The violence that is part of the struggle of the Kerala tribal community against the rule of the law and the violence that allows Dopdi to intimidate a police officer is one and the same. The ethnic community of the tribals in India is therefore ambiguous as it oscillates between the essentialist position of a subject aware of its specific adivasi consciousness, fighting against imposed displacement and Hinduttva and its democratic position of a subject fighting for its rights within the neo-liberal discourse of the nation. Amidst this ardent theoretical confusion, the one factor that comes to bind the political, democratic self and the mythic, insurgent self of the tribals is the violence incurred at the hands of law. The authors of both these texts go illuminatingly show how the female tribal self negotiates itself through the existing networks of power and law that allows for reconfiguration of subject positions and questioning the ideological content of historical discourse.

ENDNOTES:

¹ C. K. Janu throughout the course of her autobiographical narrative stresses on the way in which women are instrumental in shaping the identity of the tribal community:

In our community women always take up more responsibilities than men. This is so in other communities too. Women go to work in the fields. Digging, sowing, preparing the fields and any kind of work on land. Also, taking care of the little ones in the hut. But men are not like that. They spend a lot of time just doing nothing or wandering about in the forest. These days they waste their time on shop verandahs. They will just go on squatting there. They have become very lazy with easy access to toddy and arrack. [...] Our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of our women. (47)

This passage actually later helps to contrast the ways in which the female tribal self is subjected to the functioning of normativizing law which overthrow the women's ability to have a sense of self outside of the prevalent identificatory processes.

² Judith Butler in her text *Bodies that Matter* explicates the mechanisms behind the constructedness of an identity:

[...] construction is neither a single act nor a casual process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms [...] (Butler 10)

³ Laclau and Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* stress on the ways in which “construction of political spaces is revealed as governed by the principles of equivalence and difference” (Stavrakakis 76) In their book they state:

We could say that the logic of difference tends to expand the syntagmatic pole of language, the number of positions that can enter into a relation of combination and hence of continuity with each other; while the logic of equivalence expands the paradigmatic pole – that is, the elements that can be substituted for one another – thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined. (Laclau and Mouffe 130)

⁴ ‘Points de capiton’ within Lacanian discourse are those empty signifiers that help to foreground the functioning of ideology. The points de capiton become the nodal points that prevent the sliding of meaning underneath the signifiers and thereby fixes their meaning. Laclau and Mouffe go on to state:

If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a society, the social only exists, however, as an effort, to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, nodal points. (Laclau and Mouffe 112)

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AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Rupsa Banerjee is a PhD Research Scholar in the Department of English, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Her research area focuses on Space and Subjectivity within Postmodern Poetics. Her articles have been published in such journals as *Colloquium* and *Sanglap*. Her areas of interest include Modernist and Postmodernist Poetry, Theories of Space and Place, Hungry Generation Poetry of Bengal, Theories of Late Capitalism, and so on.