

## EXCLUSIONARY POLITICS AND STATE SANCTIONED VIOLENCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *MOTHER OF 1084* AND *DROUPADI*

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**Received: 27 Dec 2021**

**Accepted: 30 Dec 2021**

**Published: 31 Dec 2021**

### ABSTRACT

*In Mahasweta Devi's seminal work Mother of 1084 and Droupadi in pretext of suppressing the Naxalbari movement, state brutalized the tribal people, despite the suppression of the movement by the state the Naxalite movement still thrives because the marginalized people identify themselves with the movement. The subalterns like Dopadi and Dulna who are the representative of the disadvantaged class rebelled against their systematic exclusion by the state. Their struggle is to establish their right. State has exerted violent force on the rebels. The state sanctioned murder of urban rebels like Brati in Mother of 1084 and tribal like Dulna in Dopadi shows how the state has denied the Naxals the chance of free trial and how their status is reduced like that of a 'Homo Sacer' whose all rights as a citizen are snatched and whose killing can be justified. The politics of systematic marginalization sanctioned by the colonial power and then sponsored by the local governments of independent India facilitates and legalizes the dehumanization of tribal and the dalits.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Naxalbari Movement, Subalterns, Homo Sacer, Bare Life, Marginalization*

### INTRODUCTION

*Mother of 1084 and Droupadi* shares the same background the Naxalite insurgency of West Bengal, they capture the Naxalite movement of 1960s and 1970s at its height. *Mother of 1084* and *Droupadi* captures the Naxalite agitation and how brutal repression of the movement by West Bengal government led to the inhuman torture and murder of the rebels throughout the country. The play *Mother of Thousand 1084* is about Brati Chatterjee a young Naxal murdered by the state. Brati is already dead when the play begins. Sujata Chatterjee Brati's mother is shattered to hear the news that his young son's body is in the police morgue and the police want the family members to come and identify the body which is now labeled as corpse number 1084. The rest of the family members tied to hide the fact due to the stigma attached to it. They make sure that Brati's name won't come in the newspaper. The upper middle, educated class to which Brati belongs deny the existence of a Naxal Brati. Brati Chatterjee the young college graduate full of aspirations and dreams got reduced to a mere numeral the corpse number 1084. In the same incident Somu's mother lost the son who was the only hope of the family. The family didn't even get to do the death rites properly. State has a power to decide who lives and who dies and there is a thin line between a freedom fighter and terrorist.

Naxalbari movement was a peasant uprising against the tyranny of the landlords. The peasants, tribal people and the dalits who were in the periphery of periphery rebelled demanding their equal rights. They rebelled against their systematic exclusion by the state and fought for their right demanding the answer of their exclusion. In the play *Mother of 1084* Brati, Somu and friends were murdered for their involvement in Naxalbari movement, in the same way in the story

*Droupadi* Dulna Majhia tribal peasant turned Naxal was brutally murdered in the name of suppressing the rebellion. Marcus Franda, asserts “unlike most other areas of West Bengal, where peasant movements are led almost solely by middle class leadership from Calcutta, Naxalbari has spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes including tribal cultivators (Franda, 153). Oppression of the landless peasants was ignored and instead of addressing their issues, the Indian Government considered it as a “law and order problem” (Dixit, P-22). Police were deployed to combat Naxals, even after the vehement suppression of the movement, the movement continued, “in spite of the government’s muscle power and legal teeth the Naxal movement has continued to spread its base because the rural and oppressed identify with its ideology” (Dixit,23). Their murder demonstrates state power to decide over the life of its citizens. Nandani and Droupadi the prominent female characters of the plays *Mother of 1084* and *Droupadi* who come from the different background, Droupadi uneducated Santali girl, and Nandani the educated urban Naxal belonging to the upper middle class were mercilessly tortured in the police custody. Both Droupadi and Nandani didn’t attained their right of free trial. They were captured are kept in the custody but their right as a prisoner were denied. Droupadi was brutally gang raped and Nandani due to extreme torture lost the vision of her left eye. They both went through immense mental trauma.

### **POWER OF THE STATE OVER THE LIFE OF THE CITIZEN**

The exclusionary politics to which these tribal people were exposed can be explored by aligning them with Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'Homo Sacer' which he explored in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Drawing example from the Roman law 'HomoSacer' refers to any person who is discarded from any sort of social or political unit making him susceptible to any kind of violent treatment or death. A Homo Sacer is reduced to the status of bare life. In Agamben's notion 'Homosacer' is the person both beneath the law and outside of the law. Someone whose life does not mean anything for those people in the authority, for dominant social order, they are also beneath life.

The operation Bakauli in the story *Droupadi* is the act to carry out systematic murder of tribal, and dalits whose existence the state has turned to the Agambanian notion of bare life.

“Bare life” explains “a threshold of in distinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion” (105). It refers to a life where the difference between human and inhuman blurs. Agamben explains this status further through the ambiguous political status of the individual identified as 'Homo Sacer' (sacred man), “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (8). This figure is supposed to have existed in ancient Rome. In Roman law when a citizen committed certain crime his status as a citizen was snatched thus he becomes an expelled person, who could be killed by anybody but could not be sacrificed, hence it is a “double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed” (82). Their life means nothing in the sacrificial order, so you can't sacrifice Homo Sacer in the hope of getting something from god. At the same time their life means nothing even if they are killed. A citizen is reduced to a 'bare life' similarly, the killing of “bare life” was not considered a murder. The tribals like Dulna and Droupadi and the Naxals who were fighting for their rights are marginalized and reduced to a 'bare life' by the State that state denied its obligation towards these people and when they revolted against the establishment to claim their rights they were killed, and States justified their killing.

Modern 'Homo Sacer' is found in camps where the prisoners are placed outside the judicial rights the state confers to its citizens. Perfect example of the modern 'Homosacer' are the detainees in Guantanamo Bay by the American

Authority. These detainees life is reduced to bare life where they don't possess any rights as a citizen. Agamben uses the derogatory term "muselmann" used by Nazi to exemplify the state of seize. The starving Jews in the different concentration camps were stripped off of their rights as citizens and their life was reduced as a bare life. Their existence was reduced to that of living dead. Droupadi too in the story is incarcerated by the state authority and like anybody can kill 'Homo Sacer' and that killing is less than murder, all the officers' gang raped Droupadi and no officer gets punished for raping Naxal woman detainees.

Suraj Pal the police officer tortures urban Naxal Nandani inhumanly in the police custody during the interrogation "bends closer to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini's cheek. She screams ... He puffs at the cigarette and then presses it again to Nandini's cheek. Nandini screams" (Devi 33). Both Nandani and Droupadi does not succumb to the state's repressive force. They both resisted the excruciating violence inflicted on them. Droupadi elevates above the humiliation of rape and she does not let the rape dishonor and torment her instead she becomes more strong to fight to establish her right. Droupadi's resistance gives her voice, she makes herself heard. Nandani during interrogation refuses to speak anything. Officer Suraj Pal efforts to extract information from her goes in vain. She refused to say anything, all she said was "I don't know them", "I won't say a thing" and "I don't believe you". (32-33)

Nandani even if tortured inhumanly does not display her as somebody to pity upon instead she with her resistance presents herself having immense power to resist. Nandani struggles against the state's use of bio politics where the citizens tagged as terrorists does not give the chance of the fair trial. Nandani in the play demands for the fair trial of the Naxals:

No. No. No. No! It was never quiet, nothing's quiet Nothing's changed. Thousands of men to rot in the prisons without trial, they are denied the status of political, and yet you say it's all settled down again? Torture continues with greater sophistication and more secrecy, and yet you say it's all quiet? All quiet? What do you need to get it into your heads that nothing's quiet? (34)

In the ancient times the execution carried out by the state seemed more barbaric, but in reality it was more human than the execution carried out these days. Even after attaining independence, the plight of the marginalized hasn't changed. Senanayak in *Droupadi* and Suraj al in *Mother of 1084* are the embodiments of state machinery and their act of executing and torturing citizens are sanctioned by the state.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Droupadi is in the most wanted list during operation Bakauli, for her role in the rebellion. The state is unable to grant them the basic necessities of life. Dulna and Dopadi worked as peasants and they are well acquainted with the landscape of the area. State authority in the pretext of suppressing the rebellion carried out operation Bakauli in order to suppress the rebellion, and peasant's act of killing local zamindar challenged the state feudal nexus which for the years are marginalizing the tribal people and reducing them to the invalid and state was reluctant to confer those equal rights as its citizens. During the operation Bakauli in the story *Droupadi*, many rebels were machine gunned. Dulna and Dopadi saved themselves faking dead. The tribal battered by the injustices for the years get infuriated by this act. They end up killing Surja Sahu a ruthless local zamindar. During the draught tribal people have no water at the same time "there is unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as crow's eyes" (29). The ruthless landlord Surja Sahu does not allow tribals to use water from his well. The tribal people who have been subject to numerous injustices end up killing Surja Sahu. Killing of Surja Sahu should be taken more as the strategy of the survival for the tribal people instead of politicizing the act.

The feudal and imperialist temperament dehumanizes the tribal, tribal people are represented as dark bodied, wild and untouchable. The feudal mindset sees tribal people as loathsome untouchable who does not have right to draw water from the well of Surja Sahu. Anushka Sinha in the article " Resistance as Embodied Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Droupadi* and *Behind the Bodice*"states:

There was no improvement in the conditions of the tribal community even Post-Independence. Robbed of their own land, the trap of debt deteriorated their right to life as they were deprived of basic necessities food, water, and shelter. Years of exploitation led to the Naxalite Movement which aimed at killing the parasitic exploiters landowners, moneylenders, bureaucrats, policemen, and the state army. Being deprived from drinking water during draught. Dopdi, Dulna (her husband), and fellow Santhals decided to kill Surja Sahu the exploitative zamindar. (154)

The tribal peasants are struggling against the systematic exclusion by the state. Local feudal like SurjaSahu have kept the Santhal's like Dulna in the never ending debt trap. While killing Surja Sahu, Dulna says, "I'll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labor to repay that debt" (27). The anguish of the tribal people emanated from the injustices they have subjected to. From the former experience the Naxalite like Dopadi and her comrades know that if they are apprehended they will be encountered: Anushka Sinha in the article " Resistance as Embodied Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Droupadi* and *Behind the Bodice*" asserts if caught Droupadi will be countered:

"The linguistic aberration of the term "encounter" to Dopdi's "kounter" is indicative of the shifted signified—it is not the official police encounter that is referred to by the latter, rather the undocumented state-sponsored killings. (156)

Dukhiram an army informant led to the capture and murder of Dulna Majhi. Dulna was gunned down when he was drinking water lying on his stomach." Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water (23). Dulna Majhi was gunned down when he was completely off guard.

After the extensive search Dopdi Mejhien is captured she warns her comrades. Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. After Droupadi's capture state authority uses every possible authority to torture her. Stripping her of her rights of citizen, right to free trial her status is reduced to the status of a "bare life" in Agambain term somebody who is below citizenship, thus Senanayk orders, "Make her. Do the needful" (BS: 35) and the episode of brutal rape of Dopadi starts. Resisting injustices in a way is gaining the voice to speak, compelling the authority to listen.

The tribal peasants condition haven't changed even after the country got independence from the colonialism, after the colonialism neo colonialism started where the tribal people and dalits still are consider invalid and state and establishment doesn't want to affirm their existence instead the state authority wants to push the tribal people and dalits to the further marginalization and further silencing them. Dopdi's body becomes the site where state-driven violence is inflicted. He assumed if raped Droupadi will beg for mercy to spare her. Droupadi's body becomes the site of the limit violence one can inflict on the other. Droupadi's breasts are bitten raw her nipples are torn off. Droupadi loses consciousness she does not know how many policemen raped her. Her body is soaked in blood. After the brutal rape when she was being taken to the higher authority she was asked to get dressed. She refuses to get dressed. She tears the last bit of clothe in her body and howls:

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white-bush-shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do, come on, counter me...Droupadi pushes Sena Nayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time, Senanayak is afraid before the unarmed target for the first time, Sena Nayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (196)

Droupadi didn't get the chance of free trial, she as a political prisoner is placed outside the rule of law and the access to the free trial.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presents a panorama of discourses on the work. I have done the literature review of both the key terms and analysis of the critics related with the text and the concepts raised in the story. Chitra Jayathilake in her essay "Rebels and Bio politics: Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*" draws on Gergio Agamben's notion of homosacer, barelife and shows how the state marginalized the tribal, sheds light on the causes of Naxalite uprising. "What is significant to *Mother of 1084* is the second phase of the Naxalite unrest which focuses on the urban context and Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi's repressive biopolitical stratagem in the 1970s"(75).

Brati and his comrades are the victim of the repressive state Apparatus. While talking about the components of repressive state apparatus, Louis Althusser asserts, "The Government, The Administration, the Army, the Police, the Court, and the Prisons. The word repressive implies that the State Apparatus in question functions by violence- at least ultimately (Althusser 1490). Anushka Sinha, in the article " Resistance as Embodied Experience: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Droupadi* and *Behind the Bodice*" stresses:

This repressive state apparatus maintains dominant ideology through oppression of the marginalized the other whose identity hampers the process of homogenization and 'unification.' The 'other' is significantly subordinate to the 'dominant' in the hierarchy of power and political relation which makes it the 'subaltern.' The Santhal tribe, to which Droupadi belongs, becomes the 'subaltern' as it has been rendered 'inferior' through violent historical events of oppression that has its roots in the Aryan invasion and stretches from colonial exploitation to state sanctioned violence. (152)

Senanayak can't comprehend the actions and becomes afraid of Droupadi. Rape is supposed to take our honor from us but Droupadi doesn't let the physicality of her body shame her. During this custodial rape Droupadi doesn't act like victim. She is punished with brutal rape for defying the state feudal nexus that left marginalized like Santhals to the margin

Minakshi Paul in "Recontextualizing violence in the works of Mahasweta Devi: A parallel Study of *Mother of 1084* and *Droupadi*", investigates different forms of violence," violence inherent in the statecraft in terms of the state dealing with the subaltern and marginalized" (109). She "attempts to visualize the discourse of violence in a different form from what is prescribed by the Foucauldian analyses of power and relook at it from the ideology of Fanon"(109). She analyses how the state has inflected violence upon the tribals.

Raman Dixit in the article," Naxalite Movement in India: The State's response" explores government's perspective on the Naxals, social inequality and exploitation that led to the rebellion, alienation of the tribals from the forest they were

using for their subsistence. He evaluates how urban middle class youth though from the petty bourgeois background identified themselves with the movement. "When the Naxal uprising began in 1967, the Indian government looked at it as a law and order problem. It did not analyze the causes of the movement and the extent of mobilization of people. Hence, it believed that it could and would put an end to it in a short span of time using force" ( ). Dixit stress on the state's failure to impart the socioeconomic justice, and marginalization of the tribal is where the seed of Naxalism thrives.

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