



# Marginalisation of Women on Caste

## A Subaltern Study of *Chandalika* and *Draupadi*

Sharif Atiquzzaman

Sharif Atiquzzaman

Professor of English

Principal

Government Brajalal College

Khulna, Bangladesh

e-mail : sharifatiquzzaman@yahoo.co.uk

### Abstract

*The marginalized people of Indian society have been neglected and tortured by the dominating section since time immemorial. The so-called upper-class people labelled them as subhuman untouchables. Although subaltern studies as a critical theory were unknown to Rabindranath Tagore, it will be interesting to review **Chandalika** from the post-colonial standpoint. The musical drama shows plenty of evidence of subalternity. Prakriti, a low-caste girl, broods over her destiny and curses her mother for giving her birth to an untouchable family. Dopdi, the central character in Mahasweta Devi's **Draupadi** also allows us to view the subaltern identity with the hegemonic structures of the society. It's a story about a santhal woman who organised a rebellion against the local landlords who didn't allow them to fetch water from their wells for being untouchable. Dopdi, in Devi's story, **Draupadi** is a revised and demythicised incarnation of the epic *Draupadi*. She belongs to a small ethnic group called santhal. In her reincarnation, she is placed within a contemporary historical context, where her present status is described as an activist in the Naxalite movement of the seventies. Mythology is used here as a source and vehicle of hegemonic control over the marginalized 'other'. This article would be investigating Tagore's **Chandalika** and Mahasweta Devi's **Draupadi** from the subaltern standpoint, and focus on Tagore's ideal of humanitarianism and universalism giving a strong espousal to the Doctrines of Buddha. The paper also aims at showing how Mahasweta Devi produces a sense of male-dominated power structure, deconstructive and counter-historical discourse. Referring to the subaltern theory, it will further explore postcolonial issues of subjectivity, marginalisation, and identity formation.*

## **Keywords**

Subaltern, Postcolonial, Marginalisation, Untouchable, Subjectivity, Identity

## **Objectives**

Revisiting, relocating, and reflecting upon the images of female subaltern within the hegemonic framework of the society are the main objectives along with presenting the shifting paradigms of women subaltern in these select texts.

## **Methodology**

This paper has been written within the theoretical structures of subaltern studies, examining and discussing the secondary data collected through books, journals, websites, etc.

## **Introduction**

Subalternity means position without identity. The term subaltern was first used by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks. It refers to marginalised and lower-class who were subjugated by the hegemonic sections of society. ‘The history of subaltern social group is necessarily fragmented and episodic... Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups even when they rebel and rise up.’<sup>1</sup> Subaltern studies, as an interdisciplinary theory emerged in the early eighties and were made popular in post-colonial discourse by a group of intellectuals like Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, and others. When Spivak focuses on some of the problems of third-world women in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in 1985, the discourse gained momentum. Her opinion about the subaltern having no history, and females being more deeply in shadow has drawn attention since then. To her, subaltern women are subjected to operation more than subaltern men.

The Orthodox Indian society always considered women inferior and this notion is reflected in many literary texts where women are portrayed as Draupadi, Kunti, and Sita of the Indian epic. This kind the portrayal throws light on the mechanism of patriarchy and reveals the attitude of society toward women. ‘Thus humanity is male and man defines woman, not in herself but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being.’<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath is famous and criticized as well for his unconventional portrayal of women characters. A great number of rebellious female characters in his writings challenge the existing social customs and claim their right and dignity as human beings. Vinodini (Chokher Bali), Uma (Khata), Mrinal (Stri Patra), Charulata (Nashtanir), Kumudini (Jogajog), and finally Prakriti (Chandalika) tried to break the shackle of patriarchy. Of all these female characters, Prakriti is in the most fragile condition as she belongs to the low-caste community that was treated as untouchable. Tagore was severely criticized for creating these characters by his fellow critics to provoke women to be unsubmissive, but he as a humanitarian raised his voice for the right cause.

Rabindranath Tagore was not unaware of the Dalit movement that started in the early Twentieth century and got momentum in the 1930s when Dr. B R Ambedkar took over the leadership, but a conflict ensued between Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar. He declared in a meeting, ‘unfortunately, I was born an untouchable Hindu but I will not die as a Hindu’ and he converted to Navayana Buddhism accompanied by nearly half a million Dalit after two decades in 1956 and died after two months. It happened 15 years after the death of Rabindranath Tagore though he wrote *Chandalika* in 1938, three years before his demise. As Tagore was fully aware of the discrimination and violence faced constantly by the Dalits, he addressed the problem in an artistic manner by writing *Chandalika*. He protested against the age-old struggle of the marginalised section composing the drama on a Buddhist legend he came across while reading *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature* by Rajendralal Mitra.

According to the story, Ananda, a famous disciple of Buddha being thirsty seeks water from Prakriti, an untouchable young girl who serves him water from her pitcher after a few hesitant attempts. She knows that she is deprived of the right to serve water to anyone for being an untouchable girl, but Ananda teaches her that there is no discrimination between human beings on the basis of caste and creed. She is the same human being as he is. Prakriti is moved by his liberal humanitarian attitude and falls in love at first sight. When her mother comes to know it, she becomes afraid and starts cursing her daughter for committing a sin. There is a long debate between mother and daughter regarding social discrimination, deprivation of human rights, untouchability, religion, love, and social nuances prevalent in society. And Prakriti, the gendered subaltern stands as a resolute challenge to the issues of untouchability.

Prakriti, being a daughter of a social outcast, always laments her destiny and curses her mother for giving her birth in such a lower-caste family. Everywhere she is tortured, subjugated, and ignored by surrounding people. The neighbours despise her, the hawkers do not sell their goods to her, and thus, she is deprived of her human rights everywhere. In this situation, her coincidental meeting with Ananda and her subsequent act of falling in love with him inspires her to establish her identity as a human being. She starts believing that she has the right to love and shows desperation to materialise the love. Her love and reverence for Ananda arouse her self-determination, self-consciousness, and self-esteem. Finding no way to meet Ananda, she requests her mother to bring him back with her magical power. Her reluctant mother finally agrees with the stubborn insistence of Prakriti and successfully drags Ananda before her. But the response of love she expected in Ananda's face was absent, giving her a new realisation that Ananda is a pure soul above all kinds of earthly desire. Prakriti touches her feet seeking forgiveness and requests her mother to break the magic spell which costs her mother's life. The play ends with Ananda uttering blessing words on her.

Legend states that the *varnas* (colours) sprang from Prajapati, a creator god—in order of status, the Brahmin (white) from his head, the Kshatriya (red) from his arms, the Vaishya (yellow) from his thighs, and the shudra (black) from his feet. Shudras, the fourth and lowest of the traditional caste are practically artisans and labourers. They are not allowed to perform the upanayana or any spiritual rites. Although there is no precedent of untouchability in the apex source of class division, it is only with the interpretation of those hymns the caste system and untouchability took birth. According to the prevalent discourse of untouchability, they don't have any right to live rightfully. It does not matter whether they do good or bad. Belonging to the lower caste, they have no right to enjoy the equal status of the higher class. Their fate is predestined and unchangeable. And it is reasserted by Prakriti's mother as a way to refrain her from loving Ananda. '... you were born a slave. it is the writ of destiny, who can undo it?'<sup>3</sup>

In *Chandalika*, Rabindranath Tagore deconstructed a Buddhist legend portraying Prakriti, a chandal girl as the central character. His aim was to give the girl an illuminated and spiritual elevation from a subaltern status. Here Ananda, the Buddhist monk is the elevator, and Prakriti is elevated. When Ananda sought water from her and she declined to serve water to him for being an untouchable, Ananda affirmed the human value in

her by saying that both they are human beings and there was no discrimination between them. Prakriti felt self-elevated and deconstructed all the discourses of untouchability. She instantly constructed her own identity by refusing to follow the doctrines of her own religion anymore. She felt a sense of emancipation and said, ‘A religion that insults is a false religion.’<sup>24</sup>

Tagore portrays the Buddhist monk Ananda as the messenger of God who comes up with the message of equality to Prakriti. When Prakriti mentions to Anand of her lower birth, he says, ‘As I am a human being, so also you are, and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirst.’<sup>25</sup> Prakriti instantly receives the message and expresses her joy as if she took a new birth. Though her mother Maya constantly warns her against the illusive pursuit as she is untouchable, Prakriti tirelessly contradicts the discourse of untouchability and subalternity. She refuses to accept the myth of caste and origin. She tells her mother, ‘self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder.’<sup>26</sup>

Although her love for Ananda is nothing but an earthly desire, her voice is a protest against the religious hypocrisy prevalent at that time. Prakriti emerges as a feminine resistance to the so-called caste ideology. Rabindranath’s aim behind writing this play on the basis of Buddhist scriptures is to reveal the evils of the religious caste system and untouchability in the Indian social structure. The light infused in her by Ananda gives her the power to disregard vile practices in the name of religion. Although the theory of subaltern studies was unknown during Tagore’s time, he wrote the play only on humanitarian grounds. *Chandalika* is a powerful critique of Indian society that deprives the fundamental right of a low section of the Hindu community labeling them as untouchables. The play is a subaltern protest against upper-class hegemony. Rabindranath also draws attention to the inner weakness of subaltern people through the character of Maya who accepts her position as predestined. This subjectivity is not only externally imposed but also is ingrained in the subaltern mentality. Prakriti’s endeavour to transcend her externally imposed social status of marginality is at first thwarted by her mother. Prakriti condemns her mother’s passivity by saying, ‘Fie, fie, Mother, I tell you again, don’t delude yourself with this self-humiliation—it is false, and a sin. Plenty of slaves are born of Royal blood, But I am no slave; plenty of Chandals are born of Brahmin families, what I am no Chandal.’<sup>27</sup> In this dance drama, Tagore focuses on Prakriti’s struggle, limitations, and possibilities too.

Mahasweta Devi, in some of her fiction, portrays women's subjugation on the basis of caste and class. In her *Draupadi*, she represents a Santhal tribe woman who fought for the rights of her community. Both the tribal 'Dopdi' and the mythological 'Draupadi' of the *Mahabharata* struggled for their rights snatched by the upper-class hegemony. Mahasweta intervenes in the mythology which is the vehicle of hegemonic control of the marginalised people. Mahasweta devi, by using mythology, is showing the oppression continuing from the days of the *Mahabharata* to the present times. She, by deconstructing the mythological figure, portrayed her with vigour and potential. The passive Draupadi is transformed into an active protester.

*Draupadi* is a story about Dopdi Mehjen, a woman who belongs to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. The landlords do not allow them to fetch water from their wells as they are untouchables. She along with her husband, Dhulna Majhi, murders wealthy landlord Surja Sahu and his sons, and usurps their wells, which are the primary source of water for the villagers. The government attempts to subjugate the tribal rebellion through kidnapping, murdering, and raping. At first, they murder Dulna and Dopdi is captured by Senanayak who instructs the army officers to rape her to get information about the rebel uprising.

Ironically, when the same officer who ordered the soldiers to violate her chastity, insists that she should come before him wearing a saree, but she refuses and comes naked. Senanayak asks where her clothes are and the men say she tore them. Dopdi shakes with laughter and in a terrifying voice emanating from her bleeding lips, asks what the use of clothes is—they can strip her, but they cannot clothe her again. She spits a bloody gob on his shirt and says that there isn't a man that she should be ashamed of. She will not let anybody put a cloth on her. What more can they do?

The story is an adaptation of the *Mahabharata*'s grand narrative and royal attributes and is situated in Champabhumi, a village in West Bengal. The stripping of Draupadi's cloth is reconstructed in Devi's story, subverting the narrative where Draupadi is rescued by Lord Krishna. Instead, in Devi's narrative, Dopdi is not rescued, yet she refuses to be a victim, leaving the armed men terribly afraid.

Dopdi is a woman of strong will as she defied the shame associated with rape and sexual abuse. Mahasweta's stories are counter-hegemonic as these reveal the history of

repression within the mythical narratives. Referring to her re-construction of subaltern history by deconstructing mythical discourse, Radha Chakravorty writes: ‘One of the most notable features of Mahasweta Devi’s writings is the visionary, utopia or myth-making impulse that acts as a counter-balance to her dystopian, ‘forensic’, critical perspective on the contemporary world.’<sup>8</sup>

The lives of poor tribes, their revolt, and their sufferings are not mentioned in mainstream history books. Mahasweta Devi attempts to give them a voice through her writings because she wants their voices to be heard. Dopdi, in her story *Draupadi*, is a deconstructed incarnation of the mythological Draupadi, who belongs to the Santhal tribe. In her reincarnation, she is placed within contemporary historical contexts where her ancestry is treated as lower caste. Dopdi is a gendered subaltern. As a woman of the low economic class, she is subjected to subalternation.

Dopdi is in a situation where she has to act for herself. Physical torture, curse, and other forms of aggression have always been used to control women’s bodies. Always the female body is both the object of desire and the subject to control. Dopdi is gang-raped and brutally tortured all through the night, but she neither expects nor receives salvation from anyone. She neither wash nor allow the rapists to clothe her body. The sexual assault of the *Mahabharata* episode was staged to consolidate power. Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi reverses the situation and produces a sense of terror and confusion among the rapists. No divine agent comes to rescue her. The mythological Draupadi prays and seeks help from paternal powers in her crisis. Mahasweta’s Dopdi seeks help from none. She defies the authority and calls them cowards.

Dopdi, a woman of the forest is born and brought up in the lap of nature who symbolises freedom. On the other hand, Senanayak is a representative of the modern patriarchal world order. By refusing to carry out the order of Senanayak, Dopdi not only stands against the state-power but also questions the masculinity of those that violate her chastity. Thus raising her voice, she effectively breaks Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak’s contention in her book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Dopdi is a subaltern female character who can not only speak but also act.

## Conclusion

Tagore's dance drama denounces the contemptible caste system practiced in the name of religion in society. Though he has portrayed Prakriti as a rebellious character, he has not forgotten to show her limitations and impossibilities. The artistic representation of such a subaltern theme is an attempt by Rabindranath Tagore to draw people's attention to the inhumanity and establish equality among human beings. The possibilities of the subaltern society are essential requirements for nation-building. What Mahasweta Devi wants by portraying the character of Dopdi is to show the subaltern challenges in the upper-class hegemonic society. Connecting the theme to the Naxalite movement, she seeks social change. Once she told, 'I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics.'<sup>9</sup> Thus *Draupadi* becomes a symbol of resistance. She represents millions of tribal women who are fighting against religious and state oppression and they dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy. Dopdi is marginalized in more than one way as she lives in constant fear of victimization. But finally, she stands with her tribal identity and fights for the rights of her whole community.

## References

1. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Ed. and Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, Print, Pp. 54-55
2. Beauvoir, de Simone, *The Second Sex*, Translated by Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany Chevallier, Vintage Book, New York, 2010, Print, Pp-26
3. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Three Plays*, Trans. Marjorie Sykes, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1970, Print, Pp-158
4. Ibid, 154
5. Ibid, 148
6. Ibid, 148
7. Ibid, 158
8. Chakrabarty, Radha. *Reading Mahasweta: Shifting Frames*, Ed. Mahasweta Devi Critical Perspective, New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2011, Print, Pp-69
9. Mahasweta Devi, *Agnigarbha*, Calcutta, 1978, Pp. 8