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TRIBAL LITERATURE—MORE THAN AN APPEAL TO EMOTION

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ABSTRACT

There is a general misconception that many people seem to have about marginalized associations, especially about marginalized literature: that they evoke sympathy and pity and use those emotions as a way of garnering attention from what is considered the mainstream culture. This negative judgment has resulted in many critics and cynical lay people slamming and condoning marginalized literature as an underhanded tactic to tug at vulnerable heartstrings. And the ongoing debate of what all can actually be considered to fall into the purview of marginalized literature remains unresolved. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term “Marginalize” as: to treat (a person, group, or concept) as insignificant or peripheral. While one may think of any class of oppressed persons as marginalized, which includes people discriminated on the basis of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, and many more such demarcations, this paper will specifically deal with the marginalization of tribal people and their literature by exploring Mahasveta Devi’s *Draupadi*, a work of tribal literature which depicts the titular character as a tribal insurgent who is brutally tortured by the officers who are the outstretched arms of the Indian law.

Keywords: Mahasveta Devi, Tribal Literature, Marginalized Literature, Draupadi, Dopdi

Introduction

“Adivasi” is an umbrella term commonly used in India for its heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered to be the aboriginal or the indigenous population. The heterogeneous nature of the Indian tribes renders it quite difficult to consider them as just one community—for there are a total of 645 Scheduled Tribes and many more unrecognized ones—and hence this categorization is essentially very vague. One must realize that in the grand scheme of things in India, tribal people account for 8.6% of India’s population, an approximate 104 million to the national population of more than 1 billion people. That is by no means an insignificant number (“Demographic Status”).

As G.N. Devy states in his introduction to *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*: “Most tribal communities in India are culturally similar to tribal communities elsewhere in the world. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth...They accept a worldview in which nature, man and God are intimately linked (171)”.

Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak, in her foreword to her translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, says that the presence of the tribal community "marks the place of that other that can be neither excluded nor recuperated" (383). This goes to show that the class of people that mainstream culture identifies as uncivilized and backward have always been an integral part of the larger, diverse picture that our country portrays. She cites an example wherein there is a mention of a figure from the aforementioned class of people: "It is a sign of E. M. Forster's acute perception of India that *A Passage to India* contains a glimpse of such an exorbitant¹ tribal in the figure of the *punkha* puller in the courtroom" (383).

There are many people who believe that tribes are against modernization and civilization as they are resistant to change. What I have to say about this, and I am sure that this is a sentiment echoed by many, is that while advancement in all spheres of life is desirable, one must not forget about the roots from where we began. The tribal communities have greatly endeavoured to maintain the ecological balance, and it is truly an admirable effort. It is their choice to remain deep-rooted in their traditions and intimately connected to nature. And when we sound out the need for our freedom, I think it is only right that we consider theirs, too. This land and everything else in it is very much theirs as it is ours, and we have no right to encroach upon their territory. The demarcation between "ours" and "theirs" is not something that I have used to segregate the communities, but rather to contribute to the lucid understanding of what I want to convey.

There are also many others who do not approve of people from the tribes blending in with the mainstream population. They complain of rights and opportunities being overtaken, while not realizing that those rights and opportunities belong to everyone, and they cannot be monopolized by one set of people.²

Tribal literature—what is it?

To understand tribal literature, one must understand the umbrella term this genre—along with many such others—is clubbed under; and that term is "marginalized literature". As mentioned before, the term "marginalized" deals with anything that is deemed insignificant by the society at large. Marginalized people are the ones who experience social, cultural and political exclusion from the mainstream society. Marginalized literature is, quite simply put, the literature conveying the ideas and experiences of marginalization.

An age old question that has, even today, remained inadequately answered is this—whose writing can be considered to be tribal, or in general, marginalized literature? Can only what is being written by those who have experienced marginalization personally be seen as marginalized literature? What about the people who write about the instances of marginalization they have witnessed but not experienced it themselves? Or the ones that take artistic liberty in imagining what marginalization would feel like to them, an empathetic approach to bringing awareness of these issues?

There are conflicting and agreeable views of what constitutes tribal literature and the debates and discussions remain endless and inconclusive. On careful consideration, I find that I am of the opinion that, including the conventional notion of what is included in tribal literature, I would also like to consider literature about the tribal communities written by people who empathize, and not just sympathize, with the said communities as tribal literature.

There are many people who claim that tribal literature is not "real" literature. However, the Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters, says that the very "roots of India's literary tradition go back to "the rich tribal literature of India". "It is important to recognize that though the communities using these languages may be socially and economically backward, the linguistic and imaginative activities in these communities calls for attempts at careful conservation and sincere promotion" ("The Tribal and Oral Literature.").

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

Mahasweta Devi was a famous Bengali fiction writer, political anthropologist and social activist who strongly toiled and persevered for the rights of tribal communities. She had worked as a journalist and an

¹ The contextual meaning of the word "exorbitant" as the Oxford Dictionary defines it is: exceeding the bounds of custom, propriety, or reason.

² In the light of this statement, I would like to inform that I will not be talking about the topic of reservations, as it would include other marginalized groups, making it beyond the scope of this paper.

English professor before devoting her life to writing and social activism. She has been awarded with the Sahitya Akademi award (1979), the Padma Shree (1986), the Jnanpith (1997), the Magsaysay award (1997), and the Deshikottam award (1999). She has around 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories to her credit, primarily written in Bengali but often translated to other languages as well (Biswas).

Her writing is lauded for its brusque and blunt style, and she has no qualms about depicting the stark reality (Sengupta). Attention, and not sympathy, is what her characters demand. The story that will be the focus of this particular paper is *Draupadi*, which depicts the atrocities based on the supposed inferiority of gender, status and caste through the life of a tribal woman. This story was a part of a collection called *Breast Stories*, which was an assortment of short stories about women as objects limited to the usefulness of their bodies.

The story takes place in the year 1971, when the Naxalites were hunted by the Indian armed forces for their apparent alliances with the freedom fighters of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and the rebellious sections of the rural population were destroyed, affecting a significant number of the tribal, as well (Devi 386).

What is considered important for this paper is the character itself, rather than the story of the character. The titular character is Draupadi, or Dopdi, as she calls herself. This epithet could have been assumed perhaps because as a tribal she could not pronounce her own Sanskrit name, or Dopdi is a diminutive that the tribal people used.

This is how the story begins: "Name Dopdi Mejhen, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrajharh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees..." (392). She is a tribal insurgent who, along with a community of like-minded people, wishes to claim her rights. She is on the run, trying to escape the government forces, and she is unaware of the whereabouts of her husband, whether he is still alive or not. She is finally apprehended by the troops under the police chief named Senanayak. Repeatedly questioned about the plans and the persons involved in the insurgency, she adamantly refuses to answer. "Make her. Do the needful," (402) Senanayak commands his subordinates. There is a slight time leap, and we see Dopdi painfully waking up covered in her own blood, naked and tied up to posts. She wonders about how many men came to make her speak—break her. She lost count, and consciousness, after seven. She looks down to see her attacked body, her bruised and battered breasts. Her torture goes on for another day and she is broken, literally, to the very core.

The next day, when the officers command her to go to Senannayak's tent, she does so, but without clothing herself.

What's the use of clothes", she asks, "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? ...There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me--come on, counter me..." Dopdi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (402)

Mahasweta Devi chooses to abruptly end the story with these lines. Although, what could have happened next is a sour assumption not many would want to acknowledge, yet is the bitter reality for many belonging to the tribal communities. She would have been shot dead, and the authorities would just change her status from "alive" to "deceased".

Dopdi being stripped of her clothes and humiliated is similar and yet entirely different from the way the same incident occurred with the *Mahabharata* character she is named after. They are separated by time and circumstances, yet perhaps what went through their minds were similar lines of thought—the humiliation and pain, followed by the surge of indignation. That surge of fearlessness could have risen from the thought that they had nothing more to lose, the last attempt at taking in a long breath of air before your lungs give out.

Dopdi, who experienced the two-fold marginalization of being a woman and a tribal, chose to fight for her rights. She chose to look beyond the communal roles she was pigeonholed in. It was more than just about her rights, perhaps it was about the future generations' as well. While the methods that she, and the others with her, has adopted might not have been the best, we ought to remember that we have not experienced the same situations that she did. The time, circumstances, the thoughts around us and the thoughts within us deeply influence the way we act and perceive everything.

Conclusion

The comparison between the two characters serves to create a bridge between tribal literature and mainstream literature. All literature is just literature until we choose to categorize, after which it becomes genres or types of it, be it mainstream or marginalized or tribal.

Continuing on from the aforementioned idea that there are many people who are against considering tribal and ,in general, marginalized literature as “real” literature, especially because they feel that the depictions in such literature is only done to appeal to sympathy and pity and garner attention. One must realize that most pieces of literary work that we call as literature stems from personal experiences, so why are we daunted by the personal experiences of certain communities? They have as much right as we do, if not more, to vocalize their sufferings and experiences—sufferings for which we are, at least partly, responsible.

Marginalized literature is more than just about instances where the members of the communities transcend their sufferings and situations. It is also about acknowledging the situations that are their very reality. Such depictions will help the mainstream community to be aware of what is happening around them—a wakeup call to notice these horrific atrocities. This helps to mobilize support and empathy, and that goes a long way in the grand scheme of things to reduce stereotyping and discrimination.

Consider this declaration: “The subaltern cannot speak” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffins 218). By voicing their thoughts, opinions, and experiences, the tribal and the other marginalized communities cease to be just that—marginalized, subordinate and subaltern. Their voices will help them to be heard and it will forge new identities, ones without prejudice, for them.

And maybe one day, this thought of Mahasweta Devi—“The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings”—will be reiterated by many others.

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