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## **Resistance to the Sexual Exploitation of Tribal Women in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories***

**Gajanan Dayaramji Tayade**

Department of English,  
Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College,  
Akot, Dist. Akola.  
Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University Amravati.

### **Abstract:**

*Breast Stories* is a thought-provoking collection of short stories by Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Indian writer and activist. The collection explores the theme of sexual exploitation and the resilience of marginalized tribal women in Indian society. Through her powerful storytelling, Devi shines a light on the harsh realities faced by these women and emphasizes their strength and resistance in the face of oppression. The stories in *Breast Stories* depict the experiences of tribal women subjected to various forms of sexual exploitation. Devi skillfully portrays their struggles, vulnerabilities, and the ways in which they navigate and challenge oppressive systems. She delves into the intersectional issues of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity that contribute to the women's victimization, highlighting the structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization. The present research paper explores the theme of resistance to sexual exploitation as depicted in *Breast Stories*, with a particular focus on the experiences of tribal women. It examines the ways these women assert their agency and challenge the oppressive systems that perpetuate their victimization. By analyzing their strategies of defiance, rebellion, and the reclaiming of their bodies and sexuality, the paper highlights the role of individual agency, collective action, and storytelling as powerful tools of resistance and empowerment.

**Keywords: sexual exploitation, resilience, marginalized women, resistance, oppression.**

### **Introduction**

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* is a seminal work that delves into the intersection of gender, caste, and class oppression in India, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of tribal women. Through the collection's raw and evocative narratives, Devi exposes the brutal



realities of sexual exploitation and the pervasive marginalization faced by these women. Her stories are not just a depiction of suffering; they are a powerful testament to resilience, resistance, and the indomitable human spirit. The exploitation of women, particularly those from tribal and marginalized communities, is a recurring theme in Devi's work. In *Breast Stories*, she foregrounds the unique challenges faced by these women in a society that devalues their existence based on patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies. These stories portray a complex web of oppression where gender, class, and tribal identity intertwine to reinforce the subjugation of women. However, Devi does not limit her portrayal to victimhood. Instead, she weaves narratives of resistance, where the women in her stories rise against the forces that seek to oppress them, reclaiming their bodies and asserting their agency.

This paper examines the theme of resistance to sexual exploitation as depicted in *Breast Stories*, with a particular focus on the lived experiences of tribal women. By analyzing the various forms of defiance and rebellion within the stories, the paper seeks to highlight the ways in which these women challenge not only individual perpetrators but also the broader oppressive systems that perpetuate their victimization. The role of individual and collective resistance, as well as the power of storytelling, is central to understanding how Devi's characters reclaim control over their lives and identities.

Mahasweta Devi's work provides a lens through which to explore the complexities of oppression and resistance. Her nuanced depiction of tribal women highlights their agency, resilience, and capacity for resistance in the face of overwhelming odds, offering a powerful critique of the social and political structures that maintain their marginalization. Through the stories in *Breast Stories*, Devi not only amplifies the voices of the marginalized but also challenges readers to confront the structural inequalities that continue to shape their lives.

### **Objectives**

- 1) To examine the theme of resistance to sexual exploitation among tribal women in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*.
- 2) To analyze the intersectionality of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity as contributing factors to the marginalization and exploitation of women in the stories.
- 3) To investigate the role of individual agency and collective action in challenging oppressive systems within the stories.



- 4) To explore the power of storytelling as a tool for empowerment and resistance in *Breast Stories*.
- 5) To highlight the strategies employed by the female characters to reclaim control over their bodies, sexuality, and identities amidst oppressive societal structures.

## Methodology

The research methodology for analyzing the theme of resistance to sexual exploitation in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* involves a multi-faceted qualitative approach. The primary method is textual analysis, focusing on a close reading of the short stories, particularly "Draupadi." This approach aims to uncover Devi's portrayal of tribal women's experiences and their resistance to exploitation. Key elements of the narrative, such as character development, plot structure, and symbolism, are examined to understand how Devi represents the struggles of these women and their acts of defiance.

In addition to textual analysis, the research employs theoretical frameworks to deepen the interpretation of the texts. Feminist literary theory, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of gender oppression, and postcolonial criticism, informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the 'gendered subaltern,' provide a critical lens for understanding Dopdi's resistance. These theories help contextualize the intersection of caste, gender, and colonialism in Devi's work, offering insights into the broader socio-political dynamics that shape the narratives.

The study incorporates historical and cultural context to provide a backdrop for the narratives in *Breast Stories*. Secondary sources, including historical accounts and sociological studies, are used to better understand the realities of the tribal communities depicted in Devi's stories. This contextual information is essential for grasping the full implications of the characters' experiences and resistance. Finally, the research engages with existing literary criticism on Mahasweta Devi's works. Academic papers, critiques, and scholarly interpretations are reviewed to situate the study within the broader discourse on Devi's literature. This engagement with previous scholarship helps to frame the analysis and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the themes explored in *Breast Stories*.

## Overview

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (1978) is a powerful collection of short stories that examines the exploitation and resistance of marginalized women in India, with a particular



focus on tribal communities. The collection is renowned for its vivid portrayal of the harsh realities faced by these women, offering a critical perspective on the intersection of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity. The stories in *Breast Stories* are deeply rooted in the socio-political context of India, reflecting the widespread issues of sexual exploitation, economic deprivation, and social marginalization. Devi's narrative style combines realism with a stark portrayal of the struggles faced by her characters, drawing attention to the often-overlooked plight of tribal women.

Each story in the collection provides a unique lens on the experiences of tribal women, revealing the pervasive nature of their exploitation and their efforts to resist and overcome oppressive systems. The protagonists in these stories are portrayed as resilient and resourceful individuals who confront and challenge the injustices inflicted upon them. Devi's portrayal of these women's lives is both empathetic and empowering, highlighting their strength and determination in the face of adversity. The collection is structured to provide a comprehensive view of the various forms of exploitation experienced by tribal women, including sexual violence, economic exploitation, and social discrimination. Devi's stories not only depict the suffering and victimization of these women but also emphasize their agency and resistance. Through their struggles, the characters in *Breast Stories* assert their dignity and challenge the societal norms that perpetuate their marginalization.

## **Discussion**

Discrimination and marginalization based on gender are not only rampant in Indian society but are also prevalent in the Western world. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, discusses Western society as being patriarchal, where the female is subordinate to the male and is a non-existent spectator in most societal institutions. Therefore, de Beauvoir asks, "What is a woman?" She, however, insists that the answer must not be humanity as "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 05). The works of both Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi provide profound insights into the marginalization of women, delving into the struggles of women who reside at the intersections of various forms of marginalization. Mahasweta Devi's literary works offer poignant narratives that highlight the agency and resilience of women in the face of systemic oppression. Devi portrays the struggles of tribal women in India, with the protagonist, Dopdi, emerging as a symbol of resistance. The oppression of marginalized women is a deeply ingrained and pervasive issue that spans



across societies and cultures. As Waghmare stated, "Marginality with all its aspects is indeed a major problem to be reckoned with in the world" (Waghmare 16). The suffering of marginalized women has long been ignored, often considered merely a part of everyday life. These women frequently find themselves at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, such as gender, race, class, and caste, which makes their struggle particularly multifaceted.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction powerfully represents subaltern marginalia, particularly highlighting the plight of the triply marginalized tribal women, who suffer from oppression based on race, class, and gender. Her short story *Draupadi*, part of the *Breast Stories* collection, exemplifies the profound antagonism that affects the lives of tribal women. The story is described as representing "an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence begins to waver" (Spivak viii).

The narrative centres on the protagonist, Draupadi, who finds herself "caught between two uniforms and two versions of her name" (Devi 4). While her name, Draupadi, evokes the mythological character from the Mahabharata, the name Dopdi reflects her tribal identity, given to her by her Brahmin mistress in an act of perceived benevolence. In an interview featured in *Imaginary Maps*, Devi remarks, "Remember, Draupadi in Mahabharata is a black woman, she must have been tribal" (Devi 1). However, the irony lies in the fact that the name Draupadi is ill-suited for a tribal woman, highlighting the tension between her imposed identity and her true tribal heritage. This conflict underscores her struggle with identity and belonging, straddling the worlds of bondage and her ancestral roots.

When Dopdi is first introduced, "she is thinking about washing her hair. She loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith toward him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their women's honours" (Spivak 11). In Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, Dopdi stands as a symbol of resistance against systemic oppression. Despite enduring brutal rape and torture ordered by Senanayak, she refuses to submit or be clothed, challenging her oppressors with her defiance. Her resilience is evident when she confronts Senanayak, saying, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Devi 36). Unlike her mythological counterpart, Dopdi does not seek male intervention but instead subverts patriarchal norms, reclaiming her agency through resistance and defying societal expectations.



Dopdi's defiance goes beyond her personal resistance; it highlights the broader issue of systematic oppression faced by tribal communities in India. Her struggle reflects the harsh realities tribal women face due to casteism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Dopdi's name symbolizes the clash between her tribal identity and societal expectations, showcasing her resistance to losing her cultural heritage. By rejecting the role imposed on her by her Brahmin mistress and the feudal society, Dopdi demonstrates her determination to maintain her individuality. Despite the graphic depiction of violence and oppression, the story emphasizes the survival and resilience of marginalized tribal communities. Instead of portraying them as passive victims, it shows them as active agents fighting for their freedom.

Devi's works are deeply aligned with the struggles of the oppressed and reflect a leftist perspective. A central theme in her writing is the upliftment of tribal women and their self-empowerment. In her short story *Draupadi*, Devi reimagines the mythological figure Draupadi as the tribal woman Dopdi. In contrast to the mythological Draupadi, whose honor is protected by Lord Krishna, Dopdi is brutally stripped of her dignity by men as part of her political punishment. She chooses to remain publicly naked, defying attempts to cover her and symbolizing a rejection of male authority. Rather than relying on a divine intervention to save her, as in the myth, Dopdi's insistence on staying naked highlights the limits of male leadership and the failures of patriarchal systems (Spivak 11). Her refusal to conform or be subdued challenges the representatives of patriarchal society and leaves them "terribly afraid." Devi's portrayal of Dopdi exemplifies what Spivak refers to as the 'gendered subaltern,' disrupting the dominant societal norms by transforming the mythological princess Draupadi into a defiant tribal rebel.

## Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* powerfully critiques the systemic oppression faced by marginalized women, particularly those from tribal communities. Through her poignant narrative, Devi exposes the harsh realities of casteism, colonialism, and patriarchy that intertwine to create a complex web of exploitation and discrimination. Dopdi, the protagonist of the short story *Draupadi*, epitomizes resistance against these oppressive forces. Her defiance, symbolized by her refusal to be clothed and her challenge to her oppressors, reflects a broader commentary on the struggle for dignity and autonomy among tribal women. By reinterpreting the mythological Draupadi as the tribal Dopdi, Devi disrupts conventional narratives and highlights the inadequacies of male leadership and intervention. Dopdi's



resistance and the power dynamics she challenges are emblematic of the larger fight for justice and self-empowerment among marginalized groups. Devi's work not only illuminates the plight of these women but also celebrates their resilience and agency. In this light, Devi's literature stands as a testament to the potential of storytelling to address social injustices and advocate for the oppressed. Her alignment with the leftist cause and her commitment to improving the lives of tribal communities underscore the transformative power of literature in confronting and challenging hegemonic norms. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi, and by extension, the broader marginalized community, reveals a profound dedication to amplifying their voices and affirming their strength in the face of systemic adversity.

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