

Rejuvenating the Voiceless Women Entities: Re-writing Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract: *The issues of culture, identity and representation are significant to reflect analytically on tribal and black women's identity, culture, and their condition of being voiceless in Indian and American English texts with the reference to Stuart Hall's canonical essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' which states identity and identification can be seen as a process never completed, thus always changing. In the definition of cultural identity, he popularizes a term called an essentialist identity which emphasizes the similarities among a group of people. Interestingly the said definition can and does inspire feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist art and activism. Some prominent Indian and American fiction writers like Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison highlight the activism on behalf of indigenous tribal and black women and lead us to think about the voice for the voiceless tribal and black women's identity, existence and resistance.*

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Representation, Activism and Resistance.*

"I see a voice" (Shakespeare, 1998/5.1). In 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' Bottom playing the role of Pyramus rightly pronounces this meaningful and significant maxim. Actually it might express the experience of the reader who can see voices on the page. The French writer Pascal Quignard argues that in a literary text the writer tries to present silence and then perceive some lost voice in the socio-economic structure of the society and reflect the lost voice efficiently in their narratives to be a eloquent voice for the community. As Homi K. Bhabha justifiably says in his *The Locations of Culture*, 'there is a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth. (Bhabha, 2004). My objective in this article is to illustrate how Draupadi Mehjen in Mahasweta's *Draupadi* and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* break this shackle of silence of colonial truth and emerges as voice for socially, economically politically exploited and oppressed people in the postcolonial world. These prominent Indian and American fiction writers like Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison highlight the activism on behalf of indigenous tribal and black women and lead us to think about the voice for the voiceless tribal and black women's identity, existence and resistance.

Now the question arises whether your identity is given or created. The idea of identity is an interestingly creative process. And cultural identity is an idea of belonging to one particular culture and ethnicity. In this discourse of identity formation, it is often associated with the idea of self conception and self perception. So the term cultural identity obviously refers to an individual sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in a group which transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of life. In this perspective, it is noteworthy to mention the ideas expressed in “*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*” by the Jamaica-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist Stuart Hall who explores some questions about the cultural identity and a crisis of identities. According to him, the old identities which tried to stabilize the social world for a long period are sloping downward, giving rise to the new identities. So the modern identities are fragmenting the cultural stereotyped landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality. These transformations from old identity to new identity are sometimes called the dislocation or de-centering of the subject. We generally construct a comforting story or a “narrative of self” about ourselves. In *Draupadi* there are transformations of Draupadi Mehjen from an object to a subject, from a conservative tribal woman to new woman raising her voice against the patriarchal structure and exploitation of woman in the postcolonial India. The same transformation from old identity to a new identity is vividly represented to a great extent when Sethe kills her own daughter to protect her from slavery raising her voice to oppose woman’s subordination to slavery in post-colonial America. Sethe’s ways of protest like Draupadi Mehjen is also shocking, extremely powerful and unique narrative. Sethe acquires a new self definition and becomes an active maker of her own meaning. She asserts herself as a subject emphasizing the truth of her own presence.

Through an insightful exploration of Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* I will attempt to reflect on their critique of the prevailing anthropocentric paradigm and how their works draw attention to the exploitation of these voiceless tribals/blacks/aboriginals and natural resources and most significantly the journey of self discovery. African- American writer, Toni Morrison and the renowned Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi converge in their portrayal of the subverted marginal through literature. Especially women are given much importance since they are considered as the jeopardy of the society. Both writers have received international accolades and also have listed in the mainstream of American and Indian literature respectively in the postmodern literary

scenario. Most importantly they have received universal acknowledgement because they have wonderfully showed the poignant struggles undergone by the African Americans and Indian tribal, not for money or power but for asserting or claiming their basic human right of equality and liberty. Both African American women and Tribal Indian women were also dehumanized under the pretext of gender consciousness, though they were the victims of the other criteria like race, color and class. Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker the most glorified women writers have not only sensitized the society on color, or caste discrimination but have also established themselves as the voice for the voiceless

In *Draupadi*, Devi reconstructs the grand narrative, the ‘cheelharan’ of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* and subverts the story where Draupadi is treated as an object and is used to portray male power and boastfulness. In the epic, when Yudhishthira puts her on bet in a game of dice, she does not have any sign of protestation. The Kauravas try to violate her dignity by pulling off her sari that she wears. Instead Devi’s Dropdi is not passive and submissive character. When Dropdi Mehjen, a twenty seven year old widow is arrested by the Indian Police forces in *Operation Forest Jharkhand* and cross-interrogated for a long time, she does not utter a single word about her mission. The army chief Senanayak orders the policemen, ‘Make her, do the needful’ (Devi, 1981/1995). Dropdi is sexually harassed; throughout the long night, she is raped and molested by a countless number of people. After this trauma in the morning, she walks naked towards Senanayak in bright sunlight and says:

“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again?... there isn’t a aman here that I should be ashamed.”(Devi, 1981/1995)

In the epic, *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is saved by the Lord Krishna but in this story by Devi, Dropdi is not protected by any male. On the contrary, she endeavors to resist the hegemonic patriarchy of the policeman and emerges as a voice against the authoritarian power of society. So Dropdi has become an embodiment of strong mind and will as she steps forward to present voices and perspectives of the voiceless tribal rebel in west Bengal. In that case marginalized people especially santhal women were extremely exploited and tortured in the context of both the Naxalite movement (1967) and the Bangladesh liberation war (1971). This tribal woman, Dropdi becomes the object of rape, sexual abuse and ironically the exploitation of the body gives her the power to raise the voice against the phallogocentric power. Interestingly, it reminds me the essays of Spivak, ‘*Can the Subaltern Speak?*’ (1983) and ‘*The Trajectory of Subaltern in My Work*’ (2003). Here Draupadi in Devi’s story

encapsulates what Spivak means by the gendered subaltern and double marginalization denoting the marginalized status of tribal woman. In the introduction of the translation of the stories by Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly says,

“Dropdi is (as heroic as) Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi- written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as a proof of male power- could be.” (Spivak, 1997)

The Senanayak who is a representative of Repressive State Apparatus is portrayed as corrupt, imaginative and most importantly dominant voice of male power structure. The French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser in his renowned short text, *'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.'* (1970) rightly argues that Repressive State Apparatus functions by violence whereas the Ideological State Apparatus functions by ideology. According to him, RSA consists of the army, the police, the judiciary and the prison system. So the army chief Senanayak being a part of RSA and this dominant voice of patriarchy tries to suppress the voice of the revolutionary santhal woman Dropdi Mehjen. In this connection the Senanayak has a close kinship with Conrad's Kurtz who declared in *Heart of Darkness*, “Exterminate all the brutes.” (Conrad, 1902). In this narrative Dropdi defeated this discourse of hegemonic and authorities of the society when she walks in her naked body bathed in blood to face the senanayak. But Draupadi's indomitable laughter and her nakedness make the senannayak voiceless. After a few moments later the senannayak questions, ‘what is this?’ Draupadi pushes him with her two mangled breasts and asks, ‘Are you a man? What more can you do? Come on, counter me, come on, and counter me?’ (Devi, 1981/1995) Droupadi's voice is completely indomitable and it defeated the phallic power of the repressive state apparatus, leaving the armed men terribly afraid. So the identity, culture and resistance of Dropdi Mahjen, the tribal woman overcome the stereotyped representation and emerges as a voice for her own community.

Using Stuart Hall's idea of identity as an articulated positioning, my paper tries to illustrate the dynamic articulation of indigenous people/ tribal identities in the procedure of their struggle for land, food and water in postcolonial India. Stuart Hall 's abstraction of identity as an articulated positioning is apparently useful to gain a theoretical understanding of Draupadi Mahjen's struggle for identity, culture and most importantly the voice. The term articulation as defined by Hall has a dual meaning: articulation as the process of making a

collective identity, position or set of interests explicit and comprehensible to an audience; and to the process of linking that position towards achieving definite political ends. In his seminal essay “*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*”, Hall defines cultural identity in two different perspectives. With this point of view, the cultural identity of Dropdi Mehjen and her resistance and her voice for the voiceless community are well-knitted. According to Hall ‘cultural identity is a sort of collective oneself which many people with shared history and ancestry hold in common.’(Hall,1990). This statement denotes that cultural identity is a “stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning.”(Hall,1990). Therefore the tribal especially santhal like Draupadi Mehjen living in the colonies of West Bengal are struggling to discover their true cultural identity and their voice for these ‘other’ tribes in the postcolonial world.

Hall’s second definition of cultural identity constitutes a deep and significant meaning. Hall says, ‘what we really are: or rather-since history has intervened-what we have become’ (Hall, 1990). So cultural identity is not a fixed essence rooted in the past. It ‘undergoes constant transformation’ and it ‘subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.’ Hall defines cultural identities are ‘the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’. (Hall, 1990). Therefore cultural identity is not about essence but a positioning. With this view point Draupadi is positioned in the repressed regimes of the powerful patriarchal society and her voice is about to be strangled but she alone rise the voice against the colonial regimes of the then society and brings the approaches to phenomena of social change, protest and freedom. Draupadi Mehjen perfectly reminds me a biblical proverb,-

“Speak up, ensure justice, break the silence. Be a voice.” (Proverb 31:8-9 NLT)

The tribal in India and the blacks in America are almost equally exploited, tortured and marginalized but surprisingly some of them through their literature raise their voice for the voiceless, exploited indigenous people of the society in the period of decolonisation. The African-American woman novelist Toni Morrison in her significant novel, *Beloved* attempts to awake black woman’s consciousness for forging their identity and explore the voice of the black woman’s ‘unspeakable fate’. *Beloved* is not only an extraordinary slave narrative but also ‘a visit to the slave mother who killed her child’ to protect her from slavery. Here the novel reiterates the Christian idea that in the chaotic space of mother-love and mother-pain in

which a mother kills her child in order to save it. In this connection the novel reminds me another renowned African-American novelist Alice Walker who in her significant novel *Colour Purple* represents the harsh reality of black slave mother struggling towards freedom and selfhood.

Historically the novel *Beloved* is set after American Civil war (1861-1865) when The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was enacted to pursue the slaves across the state border. Sethe in *Beloved* kills her own daughter to save her from the ancient suffocation of slavery. Morrison meaningfully demonstrates this act of mercy killing of black mother to raise her voice for these black women in the violent society. So the reality of black slave mother and their repression and separation from their own children due to this corrupt system of slavery remains unrecognized for a long time in African- American literary tradition. Therefore, Toni Morrison in *Beloved* wonderfully illustrates the devastating cost of slavery and celebrates the survival of the African-American self, family and community and their voice for sorrows and sufferings. In this regards, J.M Waghmare in his *Literature of Marginality* rightly says, “American blacks as well as Indian Dalits were the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings” (Waghmare, 2000)

The Jamaican born cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall in his ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ demonstrates a delicate difference between Africa and Europe. He argues that Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of hat which is endlessly speaking.’ Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* explains the repositioning of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to at least three presences- ‘*Presence Africaine*’, ‘*Presence Europeenne*’ and ‘*Presence Americaine*’. *Presence Africaine* is the site of the repressed people who are apparently forced to remain voiceless by the power of slavery. In *Beloved* the character of Sethe who escaped slavery in Kentucky in late January 1856 by crossing the Ohio River to Ohio, an independent state signifies the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites and the brutal system of slavery. The lives and bodies are not their own and the overlords buys and sells them as commodity. In spite of all these violence, bloodshed and suppression, the blacks strive hard to assert their identity as human beings and express their voice against the dehumanizing effects of slavery and racial tension. The second ‘*Presence Europeenne*’ is all about exclusion, imposition and expropriation and then that power is regarded as absolutely external to the displaced African writers. They have to endure the dominance of European presence. The third and most significant presence is the presence of *Americaine* that continues to have its silence and its suppression.

So on behalf of these unspoken Africa-Americans, Toni Morrison emancipates the black subjects from their dominant regimes of representation. In *Beloved* seethe the black mother raise the voice against the hegemonic plutocracy that denied the black woman their basic human and political rights. Even the slave owners sell their children from their mothers like calves and cows and most horrible thing is that they stole her milk,

“All I know I had to get my milk... or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it.” (Morrison, 1987)

The bond between mother and child in this mechanism of slavery is denied devalued and destroyed since black woman are supposed to be breeding stock. *Beloved* and seethe becomes intensely attached to each other. Especially Denver becomes highly devoted to *Beloved* because she thinks she is her baby sister's ghost. But with the arrival of Mr. Bodwin, *Beloved* runs away believing that he is the white man that he has come back for her and therefore seethe tries to kill him Mr. Bodwin thinking that he is the school teacher that has come to take her back to sweet home at Kentucky. Morrison here poignantly shows how the black woman are traumatized and oppressed by the white supremacy and corrupt system of slavery. Morrison as a voice for the voiceless black woman reiterates the theme of motherhood, slavery, racism and neo-colonialism to alleviate the oppression African American people have been experiencing in the colonial and post colonial world. In this connection I need to mention an significant postcolonial text, *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gereth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in which they present a magnificent idea that the marginalized writes from the centre voicing that there is no 'centre', now the colonizer and the colonized are almost indistinguishable. This discourse and counter discourse of centre/margin, white/black and hegemonic zamindar/tribes written by the marginalized writers is focused in their narratives through re-writing and re-telling history, myth, gender, genre and diaspora space etc. Mahasweta Devi in *Draupadi* writes from the centre about the voice of the santhal woman, Dropdi articulating that there is no difference between the santhal at periphery and the powerful zamindar at centre. Similarly Toni Morrison in her literary cannon, *Beloved* also represented the scenario of the black at the margin and the white at the centre proclaiming that there are equal political, economic and social rights of the master/slave and self/other after the period of decolonization. Regarding this voice for voiceless, a renowned author-activist Arundhati Roy justifiably says at the 2004 Sydney peace prize lecture,-

“There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard.”

The colonial discourse commodifies the native subject especially tribal/black women into a stereotyped object and uses him/her as a resource for colonial fiction. One of the most influential postcolonial writers, Spivak focuses on what she calls internal colonization which subsumes the identity of various ethnic groups present in India including the tribal and outcaste. Besides socio-political approaches, literary movements also joined this battle against exploitation of the deprived. Tribal/black literature is the by-product of this process and this literature imbued with tribal /black consciousness is trying to carve out a place for the tribal/black women in the world of literature and criticism. But the hegemonic culture and ideology make the tribal/black voiceless and make their identity as marginalized and subaltern. In ‘Forward’ to Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* Homi Bhabha correctly comments on the identity of the blacks and tribals,

“This ambivalent identification of the racist world...the Otherness of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity.”(Bhabha, 1986)

Tribal/black women’s oppression was the result of a double bind – of woman and being triba/black. Tribal/black woman is oppositional to both patriarchy as well as white feminism. Tribal/black women seek the empowerment, emancipation and emergence of a voice against the oppression of marginalized and voicelss social groups of women not just in relation to whites but also to tribal/black man.The writings of Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison highlight the importance of equality in all the spheres of life and aspire towards creating a large global village of equality by infusing the spirit of voice in all the people all over the world in a transcultural milieu.

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