



Intersecting Identities: The Discrimination of Indigenous Women in Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Abstract

This article explores the themes of identity and struggles in Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. These two significant works excavate into the realities faced by tribal women in India. The novels highlight the marginalization and oppression that tribal communities, particularly women, endure. Through a literary analysis, this article examines how the protagonists in both novels navigate their identities within their respective social and cultural contexts. In *Budhini*, the eponymous character's identity as a Santhal tribal woman becomes a point of contention following a misunderstood gesture, leading to her ostracization by her community and society. And also, *Draupadi* portrays the exploitation and marginalization of tribal women, emphasizing the intersectionality of class, gender, and ethnicity. The article further engages in a comparative analysis of the two texts, identifying the thematic and narrative parallels that underline the systemic discrimination against tribal women in India. By focusing on the identity struggles depicted in these novels, this article provides a critical perspective on the wider socio-political issues faced by tribal communities in India. The article argues that Sarah Joseph and Mahasweta Devi use their narratives to challenge the prevailing stereotypes and offer a voice to the often-silenced tribal women, contributing to a deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

Keywords: *Tribal women , Discrimination , Identity , oppression , Gender*

Introduction

Indigenous communities in India constitute a substantial yet frequently marginalized segment of the population. Comprising over 8.6% of the population, these native communities are dispersed among different regions, each possessing its languages, cultures, and customs. Tribal communities, despite their abundant cultural heritage, have long encountered systematic marginalization, encompassing both economic and social aspects. Tribal women situated at the crossroads of gender and ethnicity experience significant marginalization and are disproportionately affected by societal injustice.

Tribal women in India face a range of complex challenges, including land displacement, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. These women often experience patriarchal rules inside their groups and also endure prejudice from the wider community, which usually perceives them with a sense of cultural superiority. The reoccurring issue of gender and ethnic marginalization is evident in Indian literature, as it highlights the growing prominence of tribal women's voices. Within this particular framework, the novels *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph and *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi provide valuable and perceptive observations regarding Indigenous women's challenges concerning their sense of self. These works emphasize the personal challenges their main characters face and critique the broader socio-political circumstances that contribute to the ongoing marginalization of tribal populations. This article examines the identity and challenges faced by Indigenous women as portrayed in these two works.

Identity Struggles in *Budhini*

Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* tells a potent story concerning how identity, gender and power all come together within the framework of Indian tribals' livelihoods. The work is based upon an incident that actually happened with Budhini Mejhan - a woman from the Santhal tribe who faced social exclusion from her own people after she put a garland around Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru when he inaugurated the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) project in 1959. For Budhini this simple act meant nothing other than disrepute because it was considered by many as a flouting of community standards leading to impurity label.

Budhini's main concern is her strong aspiration to synchronize her own ethnic community with the expectations of their government and society. This is further emphasised in the narrative through Budhini's identification as a Santhal woman, shedding light on the challenges faced by women residing in tribal circumstances following India's achievement of freedom. The novel illustrates how Budhini's gender and tribal status intersect, creating a complex web of discrimination and marginalization.

Budhini's identity is constructed and contested through her interactions with various societal forces. Within her community, she is expected to adhere to traditional norms that define the role of women, particularly in terms of their interactions with men and outsiders. According to certain others, the act of garlanding Nehru was a mistake on her behalf, resulting in her being socially excluded. This example exemplifies the exertion of male dominance over women's bodies and behavior in a society that strictly enforces norms and traditions, particularly among tribal communities. Furthermore, Budhini experiences marginalization not only inside her immediate social group but also in broader situations, which elucidates why tribal identification is widely regarded as antiquated and regressive. The author examines the responsibility of the state in promoting these views, as Budhini's decision not to disclose was influenced both by her cultural context and the persistent prejudice faced by Indigenous communities. Her susceptibility, rooted in her tribal identity, is exploited by both her group and the government in order to uphold existing power dynamics.

Identity Struggles in *Draupadi*

Mahaswetha Devi, the esteemed Bengali author, employs her work as a powerful tool to combat many forms of tyranny, exploitation, injustice, and discrimination. She aims to bring into focus the inequality and disparity among the Elite, Bourgeoisie, and Proletariat. In her short story "Draupadi," the writer recounts the unfortunate experiences of Draupadi who faced extreme sexual offences as a woman from Santhal tribe. There is an analogy between this event and the legendary figure Draupadi of Mahabharata. Unlike the Draupadi character from the Mahabharata, the contemporary tribal Draupadi in the post-colonial era does not have a savior to shield her from disgrace. Instead, the very people who are meant to ensure her safety, namely the police, are the ones who perpetrate the abhorrent crime of gang rape against her. Throughout the narrative, Draupadi, a downtrodden tribal woman, harnesses the power of her physicality and her innate feminine essence to combat her oppressed status. She surpasses the societal stigma typically associated with a woman's physical form. In the narrative, the historical appellation Draupadi has been altered to the contemporary tribal incarnation of Dopdi (tribe designation). By the conclusion of the narrative, Dopdi harnesses her feminine power through her emotions, rather than being subjected to the needs and anxieties of men. The tribal Dopdi's name signifies her social exclusion, in contrast to the legendary Draupadi, who was married to the esteemed Pandavas of royalty.

The transition from Draupadi to Dopdi also exemplifies the evolution in the status of women in society. While the legendary Draupadi managed to avoid being stripped of her clothes, the tribal Dopdi, in more challenging times, was unable to escape being subjected to gang rape by policemen. Draupadi exemplifies how a marginalized tribal woman harnesses her physicality and inner feminine essence to combat her social marginalization. She challenges the societal stigma normally associated with the female body. Mahashweta, who identifies as a humanist rather than a feminist, asserts that women should be evaluated based on their humanity rather than their gender, race, caste, or class. Devi exemplifies the genuine expression of feminist empowerment, as Draupadi utilizes her complete mental and physical faculties to combat her oppressed status.

Mahashweta Devi highlights the inequitable and oppressive societal structure that discriminates against and exploits the vulnerable, both in terms of physical strength and economic status, by employing the metaphor of the 'breast'. The breast is subjected to torment, retribution, and exploitation based on social status, caste, and gender. Mahashweta Devi presents Dopdi as a deliberate antithesis to the idealized portrayal of Draupadi in the ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata. In the epic, despite having five husbands, Draupadi's modesty was not protected when she was disrobed. However, it was Lord Krishna who preserved her honor by providing her with endless garments. It is unsurprising and appalling that Dopdi in this narrative is subjected to the brutal act of being forcibly undressed and sexually assaulted by the police, effectively reducing her to a mere object for fulfilling male sexual desires. In both cases, men exert a dominating and cruel influence by subjecting helpless women to humiliation inside a patriarchal culture, so reinforcing male dominance. Since Dopdi had no one to come to her aid, she ingeniously devises a daring form of resistance by refusing to allow the guys in the workplace to dress her. By asking "are you a man?" and stating "there isn't a man here," she directly challenges their masculinity. Mahashweta Devi suggests that when oppression reaches its utmost limit, it might force the oppressed to exhibit the most severe form of resistance, which can create a challenging and uncomfortable situation for those who exploit and mistreat women. The societal duplicity, systemic deceit, psychological and physical tribulations of the heroines, detrimental role of the community, and the constraints imposed on women are all accurately reflected. The portrayal of women's voices in this work effectively captures the complexities of female discourse, including subtle irony, suggestive imagery, poetic language, emotional depth, and introspective aspects. Dopdi and Ammini both undergo a distressing psychological ordeal and find themselves trapped in the slow breakdown of a conventional set of beliefs and principles.

Dopdi's identity has several dimensions where she is seen as a tribal woman, rebel and female subjected to male domination. This combination of factors places her at risk because she is easily targeted by state violence due to her gender, ethnicity and political views all working against it. Devi demonstrates through Dopdi how tribal identity is culturally and politically marginalised and also shows that tribal women suffer double oppression because they are female.

What Devi displays on Dopdi's nakedness differs greatly from women traditionally portrayed as victims of sexual violence. Instead of shame or ruin, Dopdi recovers herself and her former self, confronting oppressors directly while standing erect and looking them in their faces. This part of the plot illustrates how bodily violence can transform into bodily resistance. By refusing to be ashamed and choosing to remain stark naked before those who have imprisoned her; it means that she rejects all notions of having become a victim.

Dopdi's transformation in Draupadi serves as a poignant commentary on the redefinition of identity through resistance. She starts off as a victim of state violence and progresses into a symbol of defiance and strength in the course of the story. The most significant moment in this narrative is when she confronts the policeman

Senanayak, which marks the turning point for her identity as defined by Dopdi herself. Instead, she embodies both personal and political forms of resistance when she recklessly discards victimhood and defeatism.

Devi thus uses Dopdi's character to contest the mainstream stereotypes about tribal women who are mostly seen as passive victims of fate. In contrast to those oppression-seeking structures, Dopdi's fluid career serves him by becoming an image representing fight against everything that leads to oppression towards her body or mind through its recent past (state violence). Such change then becomes an outright critique directed at handicap structures such as casteism, class oppression combined with sexism which tend to impose meaning onto her lives. Draupadi's identity struggles speak not just on a personal basis, but also extend to tribal identity and state oppression in India. In other words, Dopdi's story is that of many; it captures the plight of ongoing violence inflicted on tribal communities especially women who find themselves caught in the crossfire of war politics. Through this, Devi critiques the state for being part and parcel of perpetrating such violence while obliterating those marginalized communities.

Comparative Analysis of *Budhini* and *Draupadi*

A comparative analysis of *Budhini* and *Draupadi* reveals several thematic and narrative parallels that emphasise the systemic discrimination faced by tribal women in India. Both novels explore the intersectionality of gender, caste, and ethnicity, highlighting how these identities intersect to create unique experiences of marginalization and oppression.

Budhini by Sarah Joseph and *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi are prominent literary examples of the tribal women's dilemmas in India. The stories focus on two protagonists, *Budhini* and *Dopdi*, whose lives represent multiple layers of oppression based on gender, ethnicity and class. They exemplify how marginalized women have survived through struggles that they could easily avoid if society were right. The purpose of the authors is to show that tribal women face a myriad of injustices arising from their situation.

Both *Budhini* and *Dopdi* are tribal women whose identities are shaped and constrained by the patriarchal and oppressive societies in which they live. Their identities are determined not just by their gender but also as members of marginalized tribal communities. This intersectionality places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, where they are subjected to various forms of discrimination and exploitation. In *Budhini*, Sarah Joseph introduces the protagonist, who is a young Santhal lady, and she undergoes great transformation after being chosen to place a garland around the neck of the Prime Minister during dam inauguration. This apparently innocent deed prompts her community to throw her out and leaves her unemployed since touching men is forbidden among unmarried women in their culture. Therefore, *Budhini*'s character has been modelled by stringent practices of her society where she has to function according to traditional gender roles.

In *Draupadi*, Dopdi's identity as a Santhal woman and a revolutionary is central to her experience of state violence. Her involvement in the Naxalite movement makes her a target of the state, while her gender and ethnicity make her vulnerable to sexual violence. Dopdi's struggle for identity is shaped by the intersection of these factors, as she resists the multiple forms of oppression that seek to define and control her.

Key elements include Budhini's nuanced yet impactful form of protest against those who reject her community. This protest serves multiple purposes, one of which is to demonstrate that no one should allow their identity to be defined solely by external factors. Budhini refuses to conform to any specific aspect of herself or any external definition, as these fail to capture her true essence. Consequently, nobody has truly understood the essence of any individual, including ourselves, until now. This understanding may also vary among different individuals and change over time, depending on evolving circumstances and shared experiences. It is important to acknowledge that everything occurs simultaneously and interconnects across time and space.

Dopdi's defiance in *Draupadi* is much more brazen. When Dopdi is given over to the police after being raped, she does not cover her body. This shows that she is not ashamed and cannot be defeated. Rather than considering her victim in front of her torturers, Dopdi reestablishes herself as a rebel through her physical appearance. The challenges faced by both Budhini and Dopdi's bodies are equally significant in shaping their individual identities. Both stories depict the protagonists' bodies as arenas where societal and institutional forces compete for dominance in shaping their identities.

The protagonist's ostracism in *Budhini* is caused by the issue around her physique, which becomes the center of attention. Placing a garland around the neck of the Prime Minister is considered a violation of tribal laws that prohibit unmarried women from engaging in physical contact with men. Budhini's body serves as the arena where her community imposes all its ideals and norms upon her. However, despite being rejected by society, Budhini maintains her dignity and quietly challenges these norms, therefore asserting control over her own body and identity.

In the story of *Draupadi*, the protagonist experiences sexual abuse that is supported by the government, with the intention of physically and emotionally harming her in order to make her surrender and comply. However, Dopdi's response to this abuse is to reclaim her physical body as a site for defiance. By choosing not to wear any clothing, she confronts those who exert authority via the use of shame and degrading treatment. Previously, it was a place associated with oppression, but now it symbolizes resistance and strength in the face of adversity. Budhini and *Draupadi* shed insight to the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class in the identity battles of the protagonists. Budhini and Dopdi, as individuals belonging to tribal communities, experience marginalization as a result of their gender, ethnic background, and social standing.

The protagonist's struggle with discrimination and ostracism in *Budhini* is rooted on her status as a tribal lady. The strict rules and standards of her group shape her values and define her function. Consequently, when she violates these norms, she is certainly expelled. *Budhini's* struggle to establish her identity might be characterized as the junction of her gender and ethnicity. As a Santhal lady, she faces the challenges of societal expectations. *Dopdi's* experience of state violence in *Draupadi* is shaped by her identity as a Santhal lady and a revolutionary. Her participation in the Naxalite movement makes her a target of her state, while also leaving her exposed to sexual abuse due to her gender and ethnicity. *Dopdi's* pursuit of self-identity is motivated by the convergence of these forces, as she opposes different types of oppression that want to define or manipulate her. The identity crises faced by both *Budhini* and *Dopdi* are greatly shaped by society norms and expectations. The communities expectations aim to regulate and delineate their identities based on gender roles and customs. *Budhini* and *Draupadi* provide valuable perspectives on the challenges of self-identity experienced by Indigenous women in India. Sarah Joseph and Mahasweta Devi use their narratives to emphasize the interconnectedness of these struggles and question the societal frameworks that sustain the exclusion of indigenous populations.

In conclusion, an examination of *Budhini* and *Draupadi* reveals the unique ways in which identity and discrimination intersect within tribal communities. Sarah Joseph and Mahasweta Devi use their narratives to highlight the struggles of tribal women, critiquing the socio-political conditions that contribute to their marginalization. Their works challenge readers to confront the realities of oppression and advocate for a more unbiased and inclusive community. As literature continues to explore and enlighten the experiences of marginalized communities, the contributions of Sarah Joseph and Devi serve as a testament to the power of storytelling in effecting social transformation and promoting a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and discrimination.

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