

Embodied Resistance and Indigenous Knowledge: A Study of Tribal Consciousness in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and "The Hunt"

Basabi Pal

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Rabindra Mahavidyalaya, Champadanga, Hooghly, India
Corresponding author
E-mail address: basabipal2011@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Mahasweta Devi's short stories "Draupadi" and "The Hunt" in the light of embodied resistance and indigenous knowledge systems. While the term "indigenous" has gained political recognition in the global discourse as "first inhabitants," the Indian state has largely confined them to the administrative category of "Scheduled Tribes." Various international organizations have highlighted the distinct political identity of indigenous people based on their distinct history, language, spirituality, and land-based way of life. This article argues that the resistance of Dopdi Mejhien and Mary Oraon is not based on any bookish knowledge or state law, but rather on an experiential, land-centered indigenous knowledge system. Dopdi's naked, scarred body in the story "Draupadi," is transformed into a direct body-politic against state terror, class exploitation, and military rape. This transformation turns subaltern femininity into a place of expression and protest, not of shame. On the other hand, in the story "The Hunt," the Jani Parab hunting festival, Mary's forest knowledge and ritual-based violent resistance construct an alternative framework of indigenous women's self-defense, justice, and collective morality. Bringing together feminist, ecofeminist, and decolonial perspectives, the article shows how indigenous knowledge systems function as both a living epistemological source of resistance to colonial-capitalist violence, and on this basis, a critical frame can be constructed for analyzing the political significance of indigenous culture in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Embodied Resistance; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Adivasi / Tribal Consciousness; Gendered Subalternity / Subaltern Feminism; Ecofeminism and Tribal Ecology

Terms like "Indigenous," "First Nations," and "Adivasis" (meaning "first dwellers") describe the original inhabitants globally and in India, though preferences vary—some communities favour "First Nations" over homogenising labels. Indigenous knowledge refers to the system by which an indigenous (local) community gains knowledge and passes it down through generations. Adivasis in India maintain forest-based traditions, yet face cultural erosion from mainstream patriarchy and assimilation.

Throughout the ages, tribal communities have maintained their local yet rich traditions and culture through their customs and rituals. The International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) defines Adivasi as the "People with distinct historical, political and cultural identities. We are united by our histories as distinct societies, by our languages, laws, traditions and unique spiritual and economic relationships with our lands and territories (qtd. in "Indigenous Peoples of India" 55). The purpose of this research paper is to analyse the reflection of tribal culture in Mahasweta Devi's short stories "Draupadi" and "The Hunt". In particular, we will examine how the lifestyles of indigenous communities, gender politics, resistance, and their relationships with the natural environment are presented in these two stories.

This research article will further explore the cultural identity and forms of resistance of indigenous characters against state repression and class exploitation. In addition, it will be analysed how women's bodies and cultural existence are transformed into a language of resistance in the two stories. The main objective of this research paper is to build a critical framework for understanding the distinctiveness and political significance of indigenous cultures.

This article reads Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and "The Hunt" in light of two interrelated concepts—embodied resistance and indigenous knowledge systems. Drawing on feminist and body-politic critiques, 'embodied resistance' is understood here to refer to political capacity that is primarily expressed through the identified, tormented, and rebellious body rather than through discourse, policy-making, or organised institutions. In Devi's writing, the female body is not simply a passive victim

of violence; rather, it is transformed into an active means of protest that undermines patriarchy and state-centred forgiveness.

Dopdi's refusal to wear clothes after being raped, and Mary's use of the hunting ritual in "The Hunt" to invert the predator-prey relationship are both classic examples of this type of bodily resistance. In these two references the body itself constructs a counter-narrative that challenges dominant notions of shame, sexuality, and legal order.

The article also reads Devi's indigenous female heroines as custodians and holders of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). IKS is a collective body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed over generations through relationships with specific landscapes, forests, rivers, and wildlife—maintained primarily through oral memory, ritual, and collective labor (Shiva 1992, 13–15). According to ecofeminist critics, such systems, "are not static repositories of folklore but dynamic, adaptive practices that sustain livelihoods, encode environmental ethics, and provide resources for resisting socio-environmental injustices" (Shiva 1992, 16; see also Shiva 2014, 164).

This epistemology prioritises alternative models of environmental ethics, communal solidarity, and justice that confront colonial and neocolonial structures of domination. The decolonial feminists describe this as the gendered disappearance of indigenous women and knowledges within the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007, 192–194). In Devi's stories, oral memory, forest-based skills, and ritualistic rules of judgment—such as the guerrilla tactics of "Draupadi" or the Jani Parab hunting festival of "The Hunt"—function as vehicles for a decolonial turn, in which subaltern communities refuse state epistemology and center their own ways of knowing and being (Lugones 2007, 189–191). This tendency is exemplified through Dopdi Mejhen and Mary Oraon, whose bodies and practices translate such indigenous knowledges into embodied acts of resistance. Such resistance reminds us Vandana Shiva's insistence that "the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand" (Shiva 1992, 18; cf. Shiva 2014, 164).

Dopdi Mejhen and Mary Oraon are being identified as decolonial figures whose bodies and practices can challenge both material exploitation and the epistemic frameworks that marginalise indigenous lived experiences as "primitive,"

“incomprehensible,” or “unnecessary” (Lugones 2007, 201–203). Emphasising oral memory, land-based practices, and communal ethics as significant forms of decolonial and ecofeminist resistance, their actions exemplify the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems under colonial and neo-colonial domination (Shiva 1992, 13–19; Lugones 2007, 189–194).

Draupadi Mejhen (also known as Dopdi), the title character of Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi", is illiterate and has no formal education. Her identity and sense of self are formed not from personal experience, but from collective struggles, shared histories of exploitation, and collective memories of oppression. Dopdi, who had been deprived and humiliated for a long time by the power structure of Indian society, land grabbing, state violence and class-based discrimination, gradually became inspired by a rebellious spirit. It was out of this repressed anger and sense of protest that she joined the Naxalite movement with her husband Dulna and embarked on the path of organised resistance against the state and the ruling class.

Devi's representation shows that Dopdi's political awareness comes from her lived experience of land alienation, landlord brutality, and state violence, rather than from bookish knowledge or discourse. They have been on the police's long-wanted list. The police officers and the state officials use knowledge as abstract and instrumental. Being unaware of the history, land, and its people, they project maps, gather intelligence, and measure success by the number of arrests and kills. They follow technical and strategic mechanisms, but are also profoundly ignorant of the moral and ecological dimensions of tribal life. Against this, Dopdi's knowledge is obviously indigenous. She is aware of forest routes, village networks, and the rhythms of rural labour. This experiential knowledge of Dopdi allows her to survive and participate in guerrilla activity for a long time. She, along with her husband, attempts to escape the brutal force of state power through guerrilla warfare tactics. As members of the Santal community, they draw on indigenous expertise in such asymmetric combat strategies.

The establishment's contempt for these methods is starkly evident in the Army Handbook, which denigrates guerrilla warfare as "the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting" reliant on "primitive weapons" (Devi, 19). This official rhetoric underscores the generational annihilation faced by marginalised insurgents, framing their resistance not as a legitimate struggle but as barbarism, thereby justifying state violence against them.

Dopdi and Dulna demonstrate exceptional proficiency with primitive weapons, including scythes, hatchets, bows, and arrows. Working with unwavering dedication, the couple roams the villages of Jharkhand in various disguises and strictly adheres to their community's code of conduct. They provide highly accurate information about police movements to their fellow soldiers and willingly forgo the usual comforts of married life to prioritise the struggle to meet basic human needs.

Dopdi and Dulna, the skilled Naxalite leaders and the chief investigators of 'murdering Surja Saha and his sons occupying the upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought', do not surrender to the police. They showcase their expertise by going underground in a Neanderthal darkness that Devi attributes to two key factors: the couple's mastery of self-concealment and the indistinguishable facial features among Austro-Asiatic Munda tribals (Devi, 17).

In the forests of Jharkhani, the couple joins other Naxalite leaders in attacking police stations, killing grain brokers, moneylenders, and landlords. They speak their indigenous tribal language, and this black-skinned couple sings a song incomprehensible even to the Santals. They revere their tribal tongue. As Special Forces capture Dulna, he roars "Ma-ho"—a tribal slogan that baffles the educated officials (Devi, 20).

Devi's Dopdi starkly differs from the Draupadi of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Moving away from the *Mahabharata*, Mahasweta Devi has reconstructed the Draupadi episode through this tribal woman, without any aura of heroism. Rather, Dopdi becomes a direct embodiment of tribal life: she kills lice in her hair with kerosene, carries tobacco leaves and lime powder like an expert in jungle geography, and relies on plants and herbal medicines for scorpion bites.

Despite her boundless love for Dulna, Dopdi remains steadfast in her community's "political faith" (qtd in Devi, 11). She obeys leaders like Arijit, Jugal, Satish, and Prabir—refusing on Arijit's orders to retrieve her husband's corpse. Branded the "most notorious female" by officials, with a 200-rupee reward for her capture, Dopdi disguises herself as Upi Mejhen. Yet the bounty tempts poor villagers; Rtoni Sahu, aided by half-bred Santals Shomai and Budhna, betrays her to the special forces. True to the creed—"no comrade will let the others be destroyed for her own sake"—she vows silence: "I swear by my life. But my life, Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told" (Devi, 28). She thus exposes revolutionary ethic in which "the individual subsumes personal loss to the collective cause, embodying a militant Santal code of solidarity and sacrifice" (Deka, 4)

Dopdi transgresses traditional gender roles, facing double oppression as both a woman and a member of an indigenous group. She challenges stereotypical subjugation, carving out her own defiant identity as a subaltern. Representing her community, Dopdi rebels against the exploitation of peasants by landlords, feudal lords, and bureaucrats. She cherishes harvesting and the land that sustains her life, working alongside her husband across Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad, and Bankura.

Unlike the epic Draupadi, rescued by Lord Krishna, Devi's Dopdi embodies unyielding willpower. After being arrested by an officer, Dopdi is brutally sexually assaulted. Refusing to put on her clothes again, she uses her scarred, naked body as a weapon, terrifying the officers present. Through this refusal, she rejects male-centred power and transforms her trauma into an indomitable source of strength and resistance. Her courageous stance is a direct challenge to patriarchal dominance and state terror.

In mainstream patriarchal norms, a naked, humiliated woman is seen as shameful, broken, and defeated, but Dopdi completely rejects this notion. Her decision to remain naked and her determination to stand before the officer with her scarred body transform her body into a powerful means of protest rather than a symbol of defeat.

Many read this incident as a purely 'radical' feminist statement, but it can also be seen as an expression of a different cultural perspective on shame, sexuality and body image, shaped by her indigenous social experiences. As the state seeks to turn her into a silent victim, she speaks a truth through her bloody, scarred body that transcends language. In this way, Dopdi's body becomes a document of suffering and resistance; not a code of law or a state document, but rather memory and rebellion are engraved on his skin. As Anjana Pandey observes, Dopdi's naked, wounded body finally "becomes a potent symbol of resistance, reclaiming her autonomy and challenging the very structures that attempt to subjugate her"(503)

Additionally, the story's title and the act of calling Dopdi "Draupadi" create a meaningful connection between indigenous experience and pan-Indian myth. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's disrobing is a key event of patriarchal shame, resolved only by divine help. By linking Dopdi Meihen, a Santhal woman guerrilla, to this epic character, Devi and her translator place a tribal woman at the heart of an important cultural story. However, Devi's Dopdi does not receive miraculous protection. Instead, she faces violence from agents of the modern state, and her resistance is entirely human and self-directed. This new take on the myth creates a form of counter-history. Rather than telling the epic from the viewpoint of kings and gods, Devi highlights the story of an Adivasi woman as central to Indian cultural memory. In doing so, she honours the lived experiences of tribal women—encompassing violence, survival, and resistance—as equally important as the scriptural teachings found in brahminical texts. By "merging mythological subversion with contemporary struggles," the story becomes a perfect example of resistance literature offering "a universal narrative of resilience" that challenges dominant hierarchies (Dey,126).The narrative thus serves as a decolonial and de-brahminical intervention, asserting that the true epic of the nation lies in the struggles of its most marginalised communities.

In Mahasweta Devi's short story "The Hunt", tribal culture is not just a backdrop but the centre of the story's moral and political power. In this story, the author very sensitively portrays the way of life, beliefs, festivals, and the position of women in tribal society. As in indigenous cultures, forests, animals, and seasons are part of life, Devi reflects a deep connection to nature. The hunting festival in "The

Hunt” symbolises man’s primal relationship with nature. Hunting here is not just about gathering food; it is also a social and cultural ritual that strengthens community unity. Devi writes in the story: “Once there were (wild) animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* 3)”. In this sense, the myth serves to protect the entire tribe and its environment from destructive animals. Yet the tradition persists long after it has lost its relevance. The Oraons celebrate Janiparab—the “festival of justice”—each year with a communal hunt. Healthy young members, including teenage girls and women, participate to display their prowess, setting this event apart. Mary, the story’s fierce, self-reliant protagonist, embodies that spirit. When the predatory Tehsildar Singh threatens her with sexual violence, she turns the tables: slaying her tormentor, seizing his money, dumping his body in the ravine, and rejoining her people for the festivities.

Secondly, Devi focuses on the indigenous community’s own morality and sense of justice. The actions of the main character, Mary Oraon—vigorous, courageous, and decisive—reveal the indigenous community’s sense of justice. Bhikni’s daughter Mary, born to an Oraon mother and an Australian father, grew into a woman of remarkable physical strength. She doesn’t see herself as “white” like her father, nor fully as her mother’s people— even if she’d been born entirely Oraon, does something innate set her apart. Her “white blood,” that vital essence, feels self-generated, a force she claims for herself. Here, the community’s moral code, not the state or the law, is paramount. Mary’s resistance to exploitation and sexual violence reflects the self-respect and rebellious spirit of indigenous culture.

Mahasweta Devi resists portraying tribal society as wholly patriarchal or rendering women entirely passive. Mary embodies independence, physical strength, and mental resilience. As a female hunter-gatherer, she reconfigures gendered power relations within indigenous cultures, particularly through the symbolic act of hunting.

Mary is depicted as a shrewd businesswoman and an efficient worker, earning recognition in the marketplace. At Tohri market, she attracts numerous admirers and moves with authority. Healthy, strong, intelligent, and humorous, she exhibited

generosity and outspokenness, which garners widespread respect. Her two primary tools, words and a machete, contribute to her formidable reputation. Although widely accepted, she is also feared by many, particularly young men who harbour intentions towards her.

Conflict emerges with the arrival of an outsider. After having a glimpse of Mary, the Tehsildar immediately pursues her, offering a nylon sari as a gift, which she promptly rejects. As the Tehsildar intensifies his advances, Mary decides to confront him on her own terms. She invites him to arrange a meeting on the day of the feast with Jani Parab as a witness and instructs him to wait behind a rock. On that day, she wears a new sari and a red blouse, both gifts from her lover Jalim. She approaches the rock and, when the Tehsildar arrives, feigns acquiescence to his advances, allowing him to draw near before revealing her deception. "Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There's fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching; what changes into the face? Now, yes, become an animal.- Now take me? Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing. Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* 17). In this manner, she kills him with repeated blows from her machete. Thus, she asserts her own freedom and symbolically liberates other women similarly oppressed.

In "The Hunt," the outsider male observer represents a colonial-capitalist perspective that objectifies Mary and reflects a broader agenda of domination rooted in imperial economics. Mahasweta Devi challenges this hegemonic view by referring to indigenous culture as "primitive." Devi highlights the priority of a life that respects nature and upholds collective ethics by affirming female agency. Indigenous culture is presented not as an artefact of the past but as a living discourse of nature-centred existence and social justice. The ritual of the hunt plays a significant role in communal life. The individuals gather, roles are assigned, and collective identity is reinforced. The hunt is regulated by established rules and taboos that reflect an ethical relationship with the forest.

Devi's depiction of the forest and the tribal community has been interpreted through ecocritical and ecofeminist lenses. This type of analysis acts as an assertion of

tribal environmental knowledge that resists capitalist exploitation. The tribal community acquires knowledge of the land, rivers, plants, and animals through sustained observation and oral transmission. Their knowledge is not codified in written form but is embedded in daily practices and rituals, such as the hunt. The forest is primarily seen as a source of timber, land value, and profit by estate owners, contractors, and agents of the so-called “development” view. Their actions—indiscriminate tree felling, community displacement, and disregard for ecological limits—prioritise economic gain over sustainability.

The ongoing environmental degradation is not only threatening the existence of the forests but also the continuity of tribal life. When modern urbanisation projects disrupt this ecological balance, the hunting festival is in danger of gradually turning from a once lively ritual into a ceremonial tradition. In this context, Mary Oran, the heroine of the story “The Hunt,” also occupies a special position because of her gender and mixed heritage. As an indigenous woman, Mary is harassed by an estate manager who embodies a patriarchal and colonial mindset.

The hunting festival offers Mary a culturally sanctioned opportunity for revenge. Mary skillfully uses the festival's timing, societal expectations, and her intimate knowledge of the forest to defeat her oppressor. In doing so, she also questions the binary divisions of hunter and hunted—nature and culture. Her actions are not the result of any personal emotion. They are shaped by a combination of collective rituals, social values, and the cultural meaning of victimhood.

Drawing on the indigenous knowledge, rituals, and collective rules of the jungle, Mary gains a sense of justice that would have been inaccessible to her within the framework of formal state law. Indigenous communities often do not rely on the police or courts, perhaps because they see these institutions as distant, corrupt, or tied to the interests of the landlord class. In that social context, the hunting festival becomes a legitimate arena for reporting grievances and seeking redress. In this way, the festival serves as a repository of environmental and social knowledge, on the one

hand, and an important site for moral and institutional deliberation, on the other hand.

A central theme of "The Hunt" is the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge due to colonial and postcolonial development. When forests are cut down, and land is converted for tea plantations, industries, or commercial agriculture, the ecological foundation of indigenous life is weakened. The decline in animal resources and forest degradation endangers the hunting festival—a ritual that once symbolised the balanced coexistence between humans and nature.

The story suggests that once meaningful practices are at risk of being distorted or reduced to mere symbolism by external influences. Because indigenous knowledge systems are deeply connected to the land and environment, their erosion not only represents a cultural loss but also the extinction of alternative ways of thinking about sustainability, community, and justice. But Devi also demonstrates forms of "silent resistance" and adaptation, suggesting that indigenous knowledge is active and transformative—providing keen insight into the destructive effects of government development and inspiring preventative action like Mary's.

Conclusions

A comparative reading of the stories "Draupadi" and "The Hunt" reveals that in both cases, the role of indigenous knowledge is clearly reflected. In both stories, indigenous women are at the centre, whose bodies and actions become sites of resistance. At the same time, both stories present communities whose concepts of land, history, and ceremonial rituals differ significantly from the dominant knowledge and power structures. In "Draupadi," the conflict is expressed in the clash between the state's militarised bureaucracy and the guerrilla knowledge of Santal villagers and Naxal activists, which progresses through observation, interrogation, and physical violence, culminating in Draupadi's embodied protest. In "The Hunt," on the other hand, the conflict is between the capitalist, exploitative forest vision and the indigenous knowledge of land, where land is seen as a collective, living space. The hunting festival and Mary's response—both become the focus of that conflict. In both cases,

indigenous knowledge serves as a complex anthropological and epistemological framework for understanding the world—one that shapes the characters' perspectives and guides their actions.

Yet the form and outcome of resistance in the two stories differ, and it is through this difference that the author develops a nuanced and critical perspective rather than blindly glorifying indigenous knowledge. In the story “Draupadi,” the ending is symbolically powerful but incomplete; here, the heroine’s resistance is primarily bodily and symbolic, pronouncing a moral truth that destabilises the power structure and confronts the reader with deep moral discomfort and questions. In “The Hunt,” on the other hand, Mary’s action is clear and definitive; she establishes personal justice within the traditional context of the festival—even as the process of deprivation in the environment and society continues. This comparison demonstrates that indigenous knowledge can generate diverse forms of resistance—symbolic, moral, and physical—in different contexts and none of these resistances is free from the realities of structural violence. Rather than creating a romantic or idealised picture of indigenous life, Devi shows how colonial history, state repression, and economic exploitation have already altered and damaged indigenous knowledge systems. Yet despite this erosion, those same knowledge systems continue to provide critical insights and alternative perspectives crucial to understanding society and the environment.

Devi’s two short stories, “Draupadi” and “The Hunt”, demonstrate that indigenous knowledge systems are built on land, ritual, collective memory, and gendered experiences. These structures are essential to understanding the true value of state violence in postcolonial India. Mahasweta Devi focuses on the experiences of Dopdi Mejhen and Mary Oraon, giving literary status to voices that are usually seen as marginal or outsiders.

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Author's bio-note:

Basabi Pal is an Assistant professor in English, Rabindra Mahavidyalaya, Champadanga, Hooghly, W.B., India. She has done M.A. in English from the University of Burdwan and pursuing Ph.D in English from Bankura University. Her research interest lies in the area of Indian English Literature, Post-colonial Literature and Dalit Literature.
