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Of Smoke and Mirrors. Adivasi Women in Postcolonial India

Abstract: This paper proposes a critical comparative analysis of two literary works dealing with the theme of violence as it is etched in various ways on the bodies of Adivasi women in the Northeastern region of India. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice: *Choli ke Pichee*" (in *Breast Stories*, 1997) share as common denominator female figures striving against the rapacious legacy of patriarchal feudalism, as well as the opposing forces within the Indian state which frame each other in a game of smoke and mirrors casting confusing shadows over the cultural politics of post-colonial India towards Adivasi women. And while the bodies of tribal women are abused by those who are generally considered violators of tribal land and tradition, they undergo a similar fate even by those purportedly trying to defend or protect them. The women described in Devi's story, though, seem to provide an important counterpoint to the violence and the tropes used in the production of truth claims by dominant discourses in India. In fact, they articulate an embodied knowledge that appears to reveal the vicious deadlock produced by the erasures and concealments necessary to keep the ideal of the Indian nation legitimate and credible.

Keywords: *Adivasi, tribal women, violence, body, power, survival*

> You are [also] likely to think that this author is obsessed with issues like police-struggle-violence-adivasi-rakshamorcha and so on. That nothing else interests her. But look, there's basically just the one question. Kaise bache?
> How does one survive?
> Mahesweta Devi, "Shanichari"

Introduction

The present reflection focuses on two short stories written by Indian writer Mahasweta Devi − "Draupadi" (1978) and "Behind the Bodice: *Choli ke Pichhe*" (1996) − in order to consider the suppression of tribal women's struggles from the collective memory of post-Independence India, and the political implications of such removal. As is well-known, Indian scholar Gayatri C. Spivak notes how official Indian historical accounts have a tendency to neglect the role played by peasants in the struggle for independence in favour of the nationalist elites.[1] This produces a double erasure whereby "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow".[2] In considering how literary depictions participate in or contrast such silencing, this essay takes its clue from Spivak's questioning oppressed subjects' ability to make their voice heard.[3] Not only do oppressed subjects often find themselves alienated and speechless, their voice is also misappropriated by those who occupy privileged positions. This results in a centripetal assemblage of power

[1] Ranajit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1988); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2002); *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard U. P., 1997); *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 1999 [1983]); Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *Palgrave Advances in World Histories* (Houndmills, N. Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). In trying to reframe Indian history as a chance for oppressed categories to improve their condition, Ranajit Guha and his collaborators have also questioned the concept of the 'political' as it has been conveyed in English derivations of Marxist historiographical approaches. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2000).

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2010), 41.

[3] Ibid.

which reduces the former to nothing more than the evanescent figures or powerless puppets of whoever decided to speak on their behalf. Consequently, the main concern here is not going to be with the 'position' of the one(s) speaking about, or next to, the subaltern, but helping expose the invisible network of powers and interests whose interaction ultimately ends up endorsing any specific account of reality. Only in the folds and at the limits of representation does it become possible to question the epistemological exclusions of Adivasi women, thus reducing the eventuality of making up one more orientalised or, worse, ventriloquised narrative. If the subaltern cannot speak, what kind of agency, if any, can she attain through the twisted maze of distorting narrations made on her account?

Draupadi

The first female character discussed here is Draupadi Mejhen or, Dopdi, as she is known among her comrades. Draupadi is the eponymous character of a story first published in 1978 in a collection titled *Agnigarbha* ('womb of fire').[4] As an Adivasi woman belonging to a group of rebels active in a northern area of West Bengal, she is involved in the Naxalite insurgence against the state and the hideous exploitment of tribal people by local zamindars, or landowners.[5] When the story opens, in 1971, she is a fugitive avoiding the claws of state police, who had been chasing her and her husband (Dulna) for four years, after they had taken part in the killing of the landowners of their village, Surja Sahu and his son. When the village was hit by a drought, Surja Saru's family refused to share the water contained in their "*upper-caste* wells" (20, here and in all the following quotations from the book the emphasis is in the original), while indigent villagers were dying from thirst. Draupadi and Dulna were among the main instigators of the uprising that led villagers to occupy the wells. Yet, thirst was not the only motive for which Draupadi and Dulna harboured bitterness against the Sarus' clan. Many years before the rebellion, Dulna's grandfather had been forced to borrow some paddy from them. This *de facto* resulted in the legal enslavement of his lineage, since all of his descendants were thus forced to work for the Saru's family without any compensation.

This kind of practice was not uncommon. The promulgation of the so called Land Transfer Regulation Acts during the years 1949-1989 led to the increasing appropriation of land by the zamindars through the structural displacement of Adivasis.[6] Land alienation was created in the tribal areas especially by non-tribal landowners and a trading class supported by the subtle complicity of the state and the contradictory fallacies present in the land regulations of its legal system.[7] Such exploitative structure goes back in a different form to even before the moment India gained independence from England. When on 12 August 1765 the Mughal Shah Alam's issued the 'farman', the document by which the East India Company

[4] Translated in English by Gayatri Spivak three years later. The two stories discussed and quoted in this article are contained in Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories* (Seagull Books: Calcutta, 1997).

[5] Radha Kumar, "Contemporary Indian Feminism", *Feminist Review,* 33 (Autumn 1989). Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories,* trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta, London, New York: Seagull Books, 2014).

[6] Bandlamudi Nageswara Rao, *Mapping the Tribal Economy: A Case Study from a South Indian State* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

[7] These were used to gain control over the Adivasi territories through mortgages, forceful dispossession of land, occupations and illegal encroachments which alienated Adivasis from their homes while putting the tribal method of life in danger.

[8] M. Reza Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

gained the revenue administration of the states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the British Collectors of revenue introduced in India the rules of English Law.[8] The inevitable intertwining of British interests with those of the landowners represented a watershed moment in the history of the country. In the name of the 'Western' principle of justice, zamindars were encouraged to use any means they deemed necessary to gain and exploit soil, almost always at the expense of Adivasis. The latter were cheated out of their lands and lured in the net of indebtedness through a bondage system which turned them and their children into slaves for generations, as they tried to repay by manual labour the small loans which they had borrowed from landowners at exorbitant interests.[9] For all practical purposes, independence worked in transformative continuity, rather than opposition, with the values of colonialism.

In the novel, Dulna's family had fallen into the pit of despair produced by this colonial heritage, after being tricked by their landowner's into the bondage system for three generations. The exploitment would have continued indefinitely had he not risen up against his oppressors. The aftermath of uprisings at Naxalbari made justifiable even the most brutal of responses by the Indian army. After the rebellion led by Draupadi and Dulna, one of the measures used to stifle opposition and punish the insurgents was a so called 'Operation Bakuli', a fictitious event recalling real ones, when "three villages were cordoned off and machine gunned" (20). Draupadi and her husband lay on the ground and, faking dead, managed to survive. Draupadi and Dulna, two migrant labourers belonging to the Santhal tribe, have been on the run since, living as fugitives and using forests as their main shelter. Police forces have been hunting them like beasts, using even the most despicable measure to achieve their goals. Such chases usually reach their painful climax in what are generally known as 'encounters', where insurgents were generally brutally gunned down. These demises are then officially classified as 'accidents', deaths which inadvertently happen while the prisoner is being held captive. Dulna has already been killed when the story begins. In a fragment of their past together, shared by Draupadi in a moment of recollection, she remembers when the military left Dulna's corpse as a bait on a stone, waiting for Draupadi to take away the body. Senanayak, the man in charge of their search, acknowledges that "this is the hunter's way, not the soldier's". Yet, he also "knows that these brutes cannot be dispatched by the approved method" (24).

This kind of stigmatization of rebels reflects Senanayak's presumption of knowing "the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do" (21). His conceit of the rebels is a key critical point which might be best understood within the bigger theoretical frame pertaining to the development of the idea of nation in India. Partha Chatterjee has discussed the diminution of the imagination implied in the idea of nation,[10] which works as a monolithic cultural formation that does not tolerate the presence of coexisting independent communities within its geographical boundaries.[11] If the idea of the nation can best

[9] Nalin Mehta and Mona G. Mehta, eds., *Gujarat Beyond Gandhi: Identity, Society and Conflict* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011).

[10] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton U. P., 1993).

[11] This represented an especially dire predicament in the extremely varied context of the Indian sub-continent and the abundance of different communities, cultures and religions often in opposition to one another and with aspirations of political autonomy (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*).

sustain itself by actually containing or eradicating difference, Dipesh Chakrabarty maintains that India's ethnic variety produced the conditions for the kind of psychic double-bind theorized by Lacan.[12] That is, the nation as an idea of unity and stability was founded on the presence of an 'otherness' on whose constant menace the new nation could project its fears. If the Indian subject had been constituted as fundamentally unworthy or lagging behind by the epistemic gaze of the English colonisers, after Independence such feelings were internally projected onto Adivasi people as well.

This coupled with the appropriation of a Eurocentric discursive formation, introduced by the British, characterised by a progressivist vision of time: the nation is considered an enumerable community in a time seen as linear and 'homogeneous'. The introduction of homogeneous time in a place perceived as separated by a great physical distance often results in allochrony, the process by which spatial distance finds an equivalent in time. In the case of India, this engendered a chronopolitical construction in which the inhabitants of villages close to the northern borders of the country, those living closer to nature and not abiding by the rules of capital, occupied an 'out there' which came to be the same as the equivalent of a bygone era. The dominant cultural imaginary burdened Adivasis with denigrating qualities which cast them to the extreme end of the chronological scale of the 'modernity' which the achievement of a national status had brought with it.[13] The northeastern regions of India were transformed into a hyperreal[14] geopolitical entity perpetually locked in the past, an indeterminate front of projection for the 'new' uneasy national imaginary.

If the British Government of India had officially described several tribal communities as an indistinct rabble of "criminals", Indian nationalism did the same to cover the fact that their politics, too, constrained tribal people to criminal activities. A complex vision intertwining capital, time and space contributed to a kind of 'inner' colonialism directed to Adivasi communities in northern India whose effects, like in colonial times, allowed law enforcers and zamindars to enjoy the benefits of their rapacious behaviour under the protection of police forces, while the poor were treated like hardened criminals, tortured to death or thrown in jail and left to die.[15]

The special importance of the tribal women present in the stories discussed here seems to arise in Devi's profound comprehension of the 'ecological' dimension of a postcolonial imagination which intertwines nature and history to create bewildering epistemologies of space and time. Place possesses many different layers which imbricate and interact with time: its material constitution has environmental 'dispositions' (such as inhospitality) as well as phenomenological connections with the bodies moving in it and which affect them. Devi exploits such dimensions to describe places functioning as cultural and environmental dispositifs sustaining a historical mode of subordination which, affecting bodies and perceptions, is founded on fear and violence. Indeed, Draupadi's story

[12] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Representations,* 37 (Winter 1992).

[13] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

[14] The term hyperreal is used here after Jean Baudrillard to refer to a space both familiar and unknown, intimate and strange, separated by the distance which allows it to emerge as an object of "radical exoticism". See Jean Baudrillard, "Hyperreal America", *Economy and Society*, 22.2 (May 1993).

[15] As a side effect, this also brough with it the removal of a key piece of India's own past and history through which independent Indian consciousness could develop and sustain sentiments of nationhood, whose "distortions in the ideals of a national culture when imported into a colonial theatre would go unnoticed" (Spivak in Devi, *Breast Stories,* 80).

presents bodies which develop an uneasy relationship with the landscape and their surroundings.[16]

Draupadi is considered by the police a dangerous enemy due to her topographic familiarity with Jharkani, especially with the forest with the same name. When she is outside the forest, Dopdi is reduced to silence, she cannot even answer back when she hears her own name being called. When she hears her name shouted just before the ambush in which she is eventually caught "she thinks of nothing but entering the forest" (31). The forest offers her shelter, freedom of movement and the possibility to coordinate activities with her comrades. It is a place both of transition, and protection allowing her body to become invisible and arrest and confuse her pursuers. Visibility is a trap for a woman like her,[17] who in the forest can bury "underground for a long time in a *Neanderthal* darkness" (20). Being represented as the reign of chaos and darkness, the northeastern forests provided the perfect context for Indian government's propaganda to nurture an imaginary pervaded with fear, a place where imperscrutable forces could bring death to normal people or the military, and thrive to overthrow national unity. It required the institution of a state of exception with the introduction of heavy military presence, while the populations inhabiting those regions 'deserved' the curtailment of basic civil liberties and human rights. Arjan Singh, Senanayak's right-hand man credited as the "architect" (20) of Operation Bakuli, "fell for a bit into a zombie-like state and finally acquired [an] irrational dread of black-skinned people" (21), and is said to have anxiety after Dulna and Draupadi survived.[18]

In the story, the Special Forces attempt "to pierce that dark" by killing Santhals and making such murders pass for "accidents". Where authority, and the nation with it, can't see, any measure becomes acceptable. To dispel the darkness, sovereign power bestows upon itself total control over biological life, causing human life to become expendable. Devi makes a caustic reference to the Indian Constitution, under whose tutelage "all human beings, regardless of caste and creed, are sacred" (20). Yet, when the fugitives ability in "self-concealment" exceeds the power of the state, "accidents" 'can' and do happen. Murders can be blatantly made to pass for accidents to a public opinion willing to pay a blind eye to a semantic shift which makes a world of smoke and mirrors possible. Rebels can only be eradicated with the self-blinding complicity of normal citizens, whose indifference is the reflective surface necessary for the state to sustain the illusion. Devi does not lose the occasion to mock the hypocrisy of a system which declares equality and freedom, but where dissenting voices "are shot at the taxpayer's expense" (25).[19] The menace represented by Adivasis is 'countered' with fear inducing measures, such as killings which must be exemplary in their brutality.[20] Devi's narrative proves masterful in the literary use of the ambivalent condition of the forest as a sort of primal site of conflict both physical and, more importantly, cultural. Both reassuring shelter and hellish maze, the forest becomes a virtuality

[16] Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford U. P.), 2011.

[17] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[18] This appears to be coherent with Freud's revision of his theory of anxiety after 1926, in which it is described as a traumatic condition of helplessness in the face of anticipated danger.

[19] To quote the author, "in this India of ours, [where] even a worm is under a certain police station" one can hear "hair-raising details" (20) by the witnesses' records on those who are suspected of rebellious activities against authorities or the inhuman behaviour of landlords and moneylenders.

[20] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

open to the occurrence of any event, and where any atrocity, as Senanayak admits, becomes legitimate.[21]

[21] Baudrillard, *Hyperreal America*, 245.

What also made Draupadi particularly dangerous and fearful was her proficiency in guerrilla warfare and the use of primitive weapons such as hatchet and scythe. Skillful at fighting at close quarters, her "fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's" (22), who "think the power will come out on its own if the gun is held" (22). Of course, there is a dense field of sexual connotations here which directly link to Arjan Singh's anxiety. Draupadi handles weapons that cut and thus can evirate or emasculate the male body, threatening its virility. It is also in a patriarchal sense that her power is greater than the 'gun'.

The sexual background is especially meaningful in the case of a woman fighter like Draupadi. For her, expendability is just one aspect of her punishment. Senanayak haunts her in order not just to kill her, but to 'make' her, which translates in the act of gang-raping. Rebel Adivasi women bear this constant sexual menace inscribed on their bodies. They know that they will pay not only with their lives, but with their sex as well. Writing about military area in Africa, Achille Mbembe maintained that phallic economies establish an interchangeable relationship between the gun and the phallus which 'strips' women of autonomous significance. In the words of Mbembe, possessing a gun, "is to enjoy a position of almost unrestricted access to sexual goods" which debases female corporeality to Agamben's bare life, and into which "one bores into, digs into, excavates and empties in the very act of rape".[22] In the second part of the story Draupadi's comrades betray her into the hands of the army. After her capture,[23] Draupadi is interrogated for an hour and then repeatedly raped by military guards. Through her "lightless eye" (35), Draupadi assists with almost superhuman detachment to the violence and to the consequent degradation of her body.

[22] Achille Mbembe, "Sovereignty as a Form of Expenditure", in Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, eds., *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2005), 163, 165.

[23] Or 'apprehension', to use the term employed by the military.

Draupadi was ready for such a treatment. In her years of hiding in the forest she had been mentally and physically training for this moment to come. Since she raised her voice against her oppressors, her entire life had become a ruinous cliff towards her ultimate defeat. She looks at her body with a vacant expression, as if she were unaffected. After she faked death with Dulna on the ground of her village, during Operation Bakuli, Devi compares their new existence to that of "escaped corpses" (21). This is because the condition of Draupadi has long been one of survival in the sense that Derrida gives to the word *sur-vie* (over-life), in opposition to *survivre*. While 'survivre' means to outlive or continue living, 'survie' is a kind of return from the dead, it "affirms a sort of triumph of life at the edge of death", it represents the impossible condition of living on after dying. *Survi*e, Derrida notes, does not mean resurrecting or acceding to the after life, but refers to "a commitment of life to life and unto death, whether it will be life or death".[24] It is a paradoxical double affirmation of both life and death inhering the impossible that might occur.

[24] Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That is to Say...* [2000], trans. by Laurent Milesi (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2006).

The violence on her body brings her to a state close to the one of a

decomposing corpse. She is now an abject-object ejected, in Julia Kristeva's words, "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable".[25] Surviving her repeated raping and mangling in her prison, which can be metaphorically compared to a tomb, she occupies an uninhabitable space of mortality. As Derrida remarks in the case of Antigone, whose "very death does not affect her", neither singularly nor sexually, insofar as women are "always in a situation of survival",[26] Draupadi's living death lasts to the point of making the impossible happen. Her imprisonment represents an excessive event of otherness which constitutes the critical wound that Draupadi survives to inflict on the guardians of nationalism themselves.

[25] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U. P., 1982), 1.

[26] Jacques Derrida quoted in William Robert, *Trials of Antigone and Jesus* (New York: Fordham U. P., 2010), 49.

When the following morning Senanayak eventually comes to see her, his authoritative question breaks before it can be uttered: "What is this? He is about to bark" (36), but stops. He is paralysed at the sight of the naked body of Draupadi, who "stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds" (36). After the violence she had endured, Draupadi confronts Senanayak with the bloody spectacle of her tortured and ravaged body. She then comes closer to him and with an air of defiance anticipates his question:

> The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?
>
> Where are her clothes?
>
> Won't put them on, Sir. Tearing them. (36)

Draupadi, the abject 'object' of the obsessive search of Senanayak, whose existence had been source of apprehension and anxiety for his proxies, can finally pronounce her name. Devi takes care to make Draupadi speak not because she is asked to, but to set a confrontational mood with the authority Senanayak represents. She can do so because she neither has fear in his presence, nor does she feel ashamed by her nudity. In fact, to be seen by him in her naked, wrecked body is precisely what she wants. Draupadi, like Antigone, lives after death as a living corpse, which recalls her relation to the unthought, or the unthinkable. Her story is the story of a double survival: before her capture she survives in darkness; later she survives in death to emerge from her confinement (the prison/tomb) as the bare life she has been reduced to. The abject-object engenders fear in the sovereign entities when it demands to enter the space of the thinkable in the 'impossible' and dehumanized form that it has been reduced to. The object exposes its abjectness before the sovereign power and, in doing so, the brutal exigencies of an economy where she is reduced to nothing but a devalued scapegoat. In fact, the clothes which should have covered Draupadi's body from his sight appear to be Senanayak's first preoccupation. Speaking with bleeding lips, she laughs and then continues:

> What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?
> ... 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? ...
> Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid. (36-37)

The mythological intertext, which up to this point in the story had only been alluded to (the unsuccessful attempt at Draupadi's denudation in the ancient Indian epic the Mahabharata), becomes here an uncanny re-enactment.[27] If in the original story in the Mahabharata the female body is "used to demonstrate male glory",[28] in Devi's story, naked and stripped of its clothes, it is used to revile masculinity. If the body of the mythical Draupadi cannot be made the object of a search, and the divine intervention hides what would wound her husbands' visual economy, Devi's Draupadi undoes the myth, and with her mangled body makes visible what an economy based on self-blinding damnation refuses to see, the violence it perpetrates. By exposing the hidden agenda of the myth, *Draupadi* creatively foregrounds how the Indian nation-state replicates the colonial agenda of 'othering'. The state bureaucracy, personified by Senanayak, engages into practices of exoticization of the tribals and eroticization of women.[29] By surviving as a living corpse, Draupadi avoids the process of sexualization and disrupts the visual economy of male desire which ultimately tends to hide its object, rather than to deceptively pretend to search for it. She refuses such an envelopment to symbolically reverse the mythical act of stripping the female body naked, thus leaving Senanayak and his masculine sense of being utterly exposed.

Draupadi emerges from the darkness to upset the visual economy of male desire and make questions which produce an interruption in the idea of the Indian nation. Devi strategically draws on the religious and historical backgrounds of the Indian nation to make of Draupadi "the creative performance of a given script".[30] She deconstructively appropriates elements of the dominant imaginary framework to use as tools to question those subtle political processes of the postcolonial nation-state that first create and then alienate the subaltern from the mainstream nation. Draupadi had been the object of male desire, of the male gaze, but only on condition that she stayed unrecoverable. When her body is actually found, the male gaze needs to reduce it through extreme sexualization from divinity to whore, and finally cover it, so that the gaze can shield itself from a body which would ultimately wound its sight. As both Indian and Adivasi, Draupadi embodies the contradictions of a gendered discourse which had been invoked to represent the Indian nation to its people. By placing Draupadi in direct relation to the myth of Mother India, which was used to nourish the non-violent rebellion against the British Empire, Draupadi highlights the failure of its metaphors based on "Love and kinship",[31] and the hypocrisy behind the invoking of Hindu mythological female characters as defining Indian nationhood.[32] Draupadi embodies what the

[27] In fact, the condition of survival which Draupadi goes through is made especially powerful by this religious subtext. In the *Mahabharat*, the sacred Indian epic about two rivalling families, Draupadi is also the name of the wife shared by the five Pandava brothers, who is gambled and lost by her husbands in a game of dice with the Kauravs family. When Draupadi makes her appearence at the court in front of the men, they try to remove her Sari from her. She is married to more than one man (a condition against the scriptures) and is considered a prostitute, a label which allows her husbands' enemies to try to shamefully strip her of her clothes, a practice known as Cheer-Haran (Dunja M. Moh, *Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English* [Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008], xiv). Yet, her sari seems to be endless. The more the rival king pulled at it, the more there seemed to be of it. In fact, Draupadi had silently prayed for the help of the god Krishna, whose providential action avoided Draupadi's fall from honour into disgrace. (Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, eds., *When the Goddess Was a Woman: Mahabharata Ethnographies. Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel* [Leiden: Brill, 2011], 196). Another interpretation proposed by Ranjana Khanna also suggests that Draupadi may have actually appealed to the other name with which she was known, 'Krishnaa' or 'dark'. From this perspective, she may have wished to be covered by darkness, become dark. As Adluri and Bagchee observe, the original epic presents Draupadī dark, as both the incarnation of the goddess Earth, and an embodiment of the goddess of Prosperity, Śrī,. As a matter of fact, Draupadī is worshipped as the personification of the Great Goddess within some regions of Tamilnadu in south India." (Adluri and Bagchee, *When the Goddess was a Woman*, 195).

[28] Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1983), 183.

[29] See, among others, Adluri and Bagchee, *When the Goddess Was a Woman.*

[30] Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1999), 78.

[31] The rhetorical backbone of the 'newfound' Indian nationalism described love and kinship as the two main qualities belonging to the genetic heritage of any 'proper' Indian citizen (See Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 239).

nation tries to bury and to forget. She exposes and attacks the idea of nation which used women first as a potent symbol of unity, then as warriors against the oppressors, and finally abuses and silences them to hide its true face of masculinity and violence. She serves as the emergence of India's collective unconscious, an unconscious that, to quote William Roberts' rewording of Derrida, mutatis mutandis, "has not been destroyed, only 'wounded', injured and that can live on: 'the deceased continues to act; the deceased is wounded' but returns, in a 'return of the dead' through which 'the vengeance of the repressed comes to its prominence in a wild nature that resists nationalistic taming"'.[33]

The power of Draupadi's question lies in the fact that Senanayak, and the complex system of embedded meanings he represents, cannot give an answer to it, and is thus left hanging over India's sense of itself and its identity. Draupadi, as the abject-object produced by this economy, is a terrifying form of bare life demanding that the horror perpetuated upon her be seen. By remaining "publically naked at her own insistence",[34] Senanayak is unsexed, and thus all the ideals of the nation he believes in and represents. In an uncanny echo of Lady Macbeth's mockery of her husband,[35] Draupadi's gendered mockery functions as a powerful foregrounding of female storytelling and female authority which, by encapsulating all Senanayak's fears, suggest a disquieting alternative to the role an imperialist legacy staged up for him. From this perspective, Draupadi's mockery represents an efficacious strategy of attack of Senanayak's identity.[36] The shock of being confronted by the abject-object produces the interruption of the brutal regime of Draupadi's violation and the possibility for her to make questions which, by hovering unsolved, reveal contradictions which may force the powerful agents of authority to question their own sense of self and acknowledge the order of make-believe they represent. This moment of crisis constitutes an invaluable opportunity for self-reflection and change.

[32] As Stephen Morton notes, following Indian scholar Ketu H. Katrak, Gandhi extended the metaphor of Mother India in nationalist discourse to mobilise the active support of women in public demonstrations of passive resistance against the British. Katrak further emphasises how Gandhi's political mobilisation of women through a gendered discourse of nationalism during the anti-colonial resistance movement did not lead to women's political emancipation. Rather, the political involvement of women was subordinated to the more immediate goal of national independence. The same ideal, once achieved, invested Adivasi women in a process of forgetting and silencing which represented an essential element to the sustenance of the the idea of the nation. Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[33] William Robert, *Trials of Antigone*, 48.

[34] Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 184.

[35] "Are you a man?" is the same question that Lady Macbeth addresses to her husband at his strange behaviour at the sight of Banquo's ghost: "LADY MACBETH Are you a man? / MACBETH Yes, and a brave one, who dares to look at something that would frighten the devil". (Act III, Scene 4)

[36] Marjorie Garber, *Profiling Shakespeare* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

Gangor

The problem of what is 'hidden' emerges even more prominently in the other Devi's story discussed here, "Behind the Bodice: *Choli ke Pichhe*". Devi starts by ironically highlighting the fact that a song of the Hindi film *Khal Nayak*,[37] titled *Choli ke Pichhe*,[38] had become, for a period, so popular as to become a sort of catchphrase or, in the words of the author, a: "*national issue*" (134-135, here and in all the following quotations from the story the emphasis is in the original). Devi piercingly considers the fact that the public opinion is "by natural law" distracted from the serious and urgent problems of the nation (such as rape, murder, injustice, and natural calamities) by secondary matters like the song of a movie, whose refrain, repeatedly and collectively sung, ironically represents the question that the people should actually be asking and be concerned about: to see beyond appearances to get to the heart of their most important matters. It's as if the people

[37] 'Villain', directed by Subhash Ghai in 1993.

[38] Which means 'behind the bodice'. It was written by the Indian composer duo Laxmikant-Pyarelal.

were constantly claiming for the truth precisely through the same instruments which hide it, thus being unwillingly complicit with the concealment of what should be eminently visible.[39] Devi derisively maintains that in such reversed order "issues will and do trample upon non-issues in the life of the nation, that is the rule" (135), alluding to the fact that the nation requires that kind of distractions for its sustenance, the inversion by which non-issues become more prominent than real problems is necessary if the idea of nation is to endure. "This is why" she concludes "'what is there' becomes so important" (ivi). Also, once again Devi deftly traces a connection between Indian cultural elements and politics, placing the female body as the unknown variable in the equation between Indian politics, religious beliefs and sexual norms since, literally speaking, the answer to the question of what lies behind the bodice is, of course, breasts.

[39] The author stresses the fact that *What is there* had become "the national problem of that year" (134) to "national *media*, the *censor-board*, liberated anti-bra girls" (135) as well as politicians and religious groups; that people "laugh, weep, dance and sing by remote control" (136), with songs like *Choli ke Pichhe* functioning as "an elixir for the times" (137): they serve to keep "the *nation* busy" (ivi) while ignoring real issues.

Upin Puri, an itinerant ace-photographer, is actually interested in 'what is there', in what lies behind the bodice. One day, walking through the streets of Jharoa,[40] Upin and his friend Ujan come across a woman breastfeeding her baby. The sight of Gangor, that is the name of the woman, moves Upin, who feels compelled to take a photograph of her breasts while the baby is suckling. Gangor does not object to her being photographed, but she asks for some money in return. Ujan was shocked and thought her to be shameless, whereas Upin gladly gave her all the money he had in his pocket: "I will sell these pictures... why shouldn't she take money? They are not dumb beasts Ujan, they understand, that even when the gentlemen distribute relief, they have some hidden agenda" (142). Even if she could imagine or perceive Upin's good intentions, she knows that he plans to get something in return for her pictures, and as un underpaid migrant worker she exploits any opportunities to collect money.

[40] A possibly fictious name probably inspired by the city of Jharia (in Jharkaland State). The town said to be situated close to Seopura, a village in the Bharatpur District (Eastern Rajastan) on the Agra-Jaipur railroad.

After that, in total admiration Upin exclaims: "God, those breasts are *stauesque*! Did you see the *mammal projections*?' But Ujan "didn't look" (142, emphasis in the original). He is embarassed by Gangor's body, so he turns his look away from it. It is critical to highlight the difference in the gaze between the two men. Ujan acts like the average person who, with his not having the courage to look at Gangor's sexualised body, sustains the regime of indifference and not-seeing criticised by Devi, and which would eventually lead to Upin's death. Contrary to Ujan, from the moment Upin takes Gangor's photograph he develops a deadly fascination for Gangor. He fantasises about her breasts caught in various situations and starts looking for her to take other pictures.

On the second occasion, though, Upin who had no money offered her his watch instead. This provokes a violent reaction on the part of Gangor, who throws the watch away and breaks it so that is stops. "The watch is stopped, will remain so. Upin did not get the watch repaired" (143). The halting of time, together with the communication breakdown between Gangor and Upin, aptly describes the relationship between native and outsider on multiple levels. In totally good faith, the 'gentleman' Upin gives Gangor his watch thinking that no harm could come

from this act. He does not even remotely imagine the kind of difficulties and social dangers a woman like Gangor has to suffer or look out for. She suspects that Upin cedes his watch only to report her to the police as a thief at a later time. This misunderstanding highlights how Gangor and Upin represent different social actors with diverse and often conflicting social contexts. Gangor's rage at Upin dramatically exposes the unwillingeness, or even impossibility, to be contained within Upin's parameters, even in light of benevolent intentions on the part of privileged exponents of the elite wishing to aid a native. Moreover, the breaking of the watch metaphorically produces the end of linear chronology which challenges Upin's 'objective' recording of her situation. Gangor here emerges as a singularity, a lived experience situated in a non-chronological temporal dimension which defies the linear, supposedly impartial chronological time which Indian elites embraced with the Eurocentric idea of modernity, and with which they pretend to enter into a dialogic relationship with the oppressed. Gangor represents what "lives 'under' the nation, resisting inclusion into the "larger" national identity, insisting on space/time trajectories that do not mesh with progressivist dominant narratives of nation and history".[41]

Upin's curiosity is compared by Ujan to an uncle of a friend of his, an anthropologist who had been to Dandakaranya to "uncover chests of aboriginal women" but ended up losing "his mind little by little". If Devi openly criticizes Ujan's indifference, she knows better than to present Upin's intensions in a totally positive light. There are problems with his basically benevolent impulse, too. The ravenous hunger for the missing body of woman is caught in its dualistic position as both well-meaning and problematic. He fantasizes "Gangor at night, roasting doughballs on a dried cowdung fire, bent slightly forward" (145), or compares her breasts to the Konarak, a temple sculpture in Orissa, as well as the cave paintings of Ajanta.[42] In other words, Gangor's body captures Upin's imagination in such a way as to become a product of his fantasy. Upin's is the outsider's gaze turning Gangor into his Other.

In the meantime, Upin's photos have reached the news with these words written in English: "The half-naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. *Save them*! *Save the breast*!" (139). This gave the town of Jharoa unwanted notoriety that puts Gangor in danger. She is recognised as the woman on the newspaper, attracting national attention on the problems of the place, and harassed. Upin starts a desperate search for Gangor, who is now difficult to find because no one would share her whereabouts with him. He feels as if he is the target of what he himself defines "a conspiracy of silence" (145). For this behaviour, Ujan thinks he's gone crazy. As a matter of fact, the place starts to exert sinister influences on Upin's mind and to be perceived as unreal by him. In Jharoa even in the midday Upin feels as a permanent night had fallen on it (148) due to the people's secrecy. Upin's questions on where he can find Gangor are met with a

[41] Nivedita Menon, "Thinking through the Postnation", in Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, eds., *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reade*r (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 328.

[42] As Spivak points out in a note to the text, these "sculptural examples are international and national tourist spots" (143).

wall of silence articulating an apparently insoluble labyrinthine path which forces him to wander from village to village.

Eventually, under the notes of *Choli ke Pichhe* echoing from somewhere, Upin learns from a caretaker that he had "ruined her [Gangor] with pictures" (149). Apparently, Gangor had become more confident after Upin had taken pictures of her, she had started boasting with the people at the market and even dared to press charges against the police who, after that bravery, had been monitoring her so closely that no one dared to give work to Gangor or even speak a word to her. "Women have to be careful in Shiva's world. You're punished if you don't understand this" (150). "Now" the caretaker concludes, "she does what is expected". Upin begins to realize that his messing around with the equilibrium of the place had put Gangor in some kind of danger, yet insists on the necessity of saving Gangor without realizing the warning contained in the caretaker's statements: "Upin's head wasn't working, he couldn't grasp what the Caretaker was saying" (151). In his attempt to find Gangor and save her, Upin becomes like possessed by an obsessive fixation which drives him to live in complete solitude, he doesn't eat and starts letting himself go.[43]

When the two eventually meet, *Choli ke Pichhe* again playing in the background, Gangor admits that the moment she had gone to the police was the one in which "all was lost" (154). As in the moment of confrontation between Draupadi and Senanayak, we become upset witnesses of a reversal of subject positions which confounds and silences male authority, in this case the benevolent outsider willing to help Gangor by giving her, and indirectly to women like her, visibility in the press. In fact, Upin, whom by this time is starting to dreadfully realize the consequences of his fascination for Gangor, cannot answer her questions except impotently cry out Gangor's name:

> Gangor!
>
> You snapped many many times my chest, Sir. But I knew your plan. Otherwise would you have given so much cash?
>
> Gangor!
>
> Will Gangor unwind her cloth, or just lift it? Do your stuff, 20 rupees. Spend the night, 50, tell me quick.
>
> You are doing whore work, Gangor?
>
> What's it to you son of a whore?
>
> ...
>
> You are a bastard too Sir" (154)

Gangor continues by equating Upin's photo-taking to an act of whoring of Gangor's body, until she throws her choli at Upin so that he can finally see what's behind it. Reminding him of the song playing as they speak, she challenges him to "look what's there" (154). Upin is now confronted with the sight of the mangled breasts of Gangor; where two prominent breasts stood before, there are now only

[43] "Somewhere a feeling of vulnerability, for some time an *obsession* has been spinning him like a top. To live in such solitude, to have denied the natural demands of life so much, was perhaps not right. Gangor's developed breasts are natural, not manufactured. Why did he first they were the object of photography? Why did it seem that that chest was endangered?-What is this craziness, Sir, go away, dont' you have a home?" (152). The contrast here is apparent: Upin's quest sprung by his appreciation of the 'natural-ness' of Gangor's breasts, which he had somehow perceived to be in danger, yet his porsuit leads him to unnatural behaviour.

"volcanic craters", "two dry scars, wrinkled skin" (155) as a result of multiple acts of gang-raping. Upin can barely stand in front of Gangor's ravaged body and, eventually, runs away terrified. "There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known." (155)

By exposing Gangor's body through the press, she ended up being gang-raped by some men who had noticed her. When she had gone to the police, she was gang-raped by them, too, and after pressing charges against them, she was repeatedly tortured and gang-raped until she was mutilated and deprived of her breasts.[44] Upin, the outsider, had not considered the twisting spell of the place. Upin's delusion consists of the fact that he single-handedly believes he can save Gangor through his own means, without taking into consideration the power of the place, the actual necessities and dangers Gangor would undergo in consequence of his actions, ignoring the power of the collective gaze able to set up a distorting field ensnaring and paralyzing those who dared to look at it. At the end of this trajectory Upin finds himself as the true marginal, incapable of answering Gangor's accusations, and is eventually killed by unknown agents during his flight. This process makes him "a missing person" (137), "a nameless person's corpse" (137), whose death "escaped the nation's eye" when it was reported in the "inch-and-a-half of space in the newspaper" (137). In fact, the nation, as Devi bitterly explains at the beginning of the story, was busy singing *Choli ke Pichhe*.

[44] Taslima Nasrin and Monica Ali, "Hearing 'Subaltern' Voices of Resistance in the Works of Mahasweta Devi", Ph. D. thesis available at: https://goo.gl/eZjO0m.

Like Draupadi, who could not be covered in the metaphorical Sari of the myth of Mother India, another Adivasi woman is presented here as a gendered subject who finds no shelter or protection under the gaze of the benevolent outsider. On the contrary, her body bears the signs of an unseen and unacknowledged collective rape working as a metaphor for "a disembodied yet anthropomorphic"[45] power produced by a postcolonial imagination and whose resonances vibrate in Gangor's own name.[46] Dishearteningly hopeless as Devi's narrations may seem in their harsh realism, Senanayak's presumptions and attitude toward Draupadi, as well as Upin's almost stubborn misunderstanding of Gangor provide the possibility for a moment of revelation or crisis out of the epistemological inscrutability which abused women like Draupadi and Gangor find themselves in.

[45] Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 260.

[46] When Ujan tries to explain to Upin's wife, Shital Mallaya, the circumstances surrounding Upin's death, at first she interprets the name Gangor as Gangauri, the name of the Ganges (of which Gangor is yet another variant) river festival in Rajasthan and which, as Spivak observes, "is similar to ganadharshan or 'rape of the people'.... Behind the bodice is a rape of the people. Here the breast becomes a concept metaphor (rather than a symbol) of police violence in the democratic state" (Spivak in the introduction to the text, xi).

The attempts to characterise the two disempowered subjects as the object of the gaze both of merciless authority, and of the genuinely supportive intellectual, fail when exposed to women whose grotesquely embodied knowledge cannot be accounted for by dominant discourses and terms of representation. Those bodies carry the burdens of realities much more complex than they appear. The power of the stories of Draupadi and Gangor lies in the fact that these women challenge the Indian elites' regime of truth not by threatening to destroy it, but because they reveal the 'weaknesses in their imaginations'.[47] They induce a shock to the agents of power through the indeterminacy, the inconsistencies and anxieties produced as side effects of those forces which keep the violence invisible.

[47] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 50.

From this point of view, Devi's women and narrative technique appear to have gained renewed topicality if one considers later political developments in India. Decades of internal colonisation have paved the way for the creation of very special areas within the country known as SEZs (Special Economic Zones). A policy for them was announced in March 2000 "with a view to augmenting infrastructure facilities for export production.... These SEZs are to be deemed *foreign territory* for tariff and trade operations".[48] At their heart SEZs are financially favoured enclaves for trade transactions whose creation aims to attract foreign investment,[49] yet as Gabriella Waas notes, this also means the presence of "a foreign territory within our territory and many countries within country".[50] Such spaces are marked off as "foreign", that is as distinct or 'outside' regions even if contained from within national boundaries in order to allow for the suspension or rewriting of regular laws and customary practices which normally apply to the rest of Indian territory.[51] Capital interests are identified *tout court* with national progress, in whose name the state is prepared to officially renounce to its sovereignty in order to host 'foreign' territory within its own territory. Practically, however, this does not translate in a cessation of Indian law but, on the contrary, in a strengthening of state grip within those areas, especially through an intensification of military forces. Incidentally, Adivasi territories are the ones which, for their richness in natural resources, are the most frequently converted into SEZs, and many geographical areas like the ones described by Devi have become one. SEZs allow for the bypassing of laws envisioned to protect Adivasis, thus justifying their displacement and forceful land acquisition even in the presence of formal requirements for environmental clearance or areas assigned to tribal people.[52] The creeping process of inner colonialism more sophisticatedly claims its legitimacy on Adivasis and natural resources in ways which, in appearance, formally uphold the rights of tribals. If Devi's women may deserve renewed interest today, the reason may be traced in their making questions exposing the contradictions in the genealogy of the nation, and to which male authority cannot provide an answer. Such hesitation, the pause produced by such questions offers a breach to interrogate the benefits of the epistemological confusion between decolonisation and national development which ultimately legitimates violence towards the weak. To the extent that the process by which Indian historical knowledge suffocate or appropriate those questions, Devi reminds us, the nation will not be able to claim true responsibility for all of its children.

[48] Kulwant Rai Gupta, ed., *Special Economic Zones: Issues, Laws and Procedures*, vol. 2 (Printman: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2008), 483. Emphasis added for emphasis.

[49] Since companies operating within one of those can do so at prices competitive on a global scale.

[50] Gabriella Wass, ed., *Corporate Activity and Human Rights in India* (Shivam Sundaram: Human Rights Law Network, 2011), 87.

[51] It is to be noted, moreover, that each of these zones enjoy the benefit of approving their own financial and environmental laws, which can also differ from one another.

[52] The so-called 'schedule V areas', which by the Indian Constitution cannot be ceded to non-tribals. Recent examples of forceful displacements of Adivasis due to SEZs that can be cited here are the Vedanta Alumina Limited's project of bauxite mining in the Niya-mgiri Hills, Lanjigarh. In 2005 the corporate giant Reliance received thousands of acres of land in Uttar Pradesh, which had agriculturally nurtured native villagers for generations, to erect a power plant. The state of West Bengal has attracted strong criticism for acquiring hundreds of aces of farmers' land in Singur for the Tata group to manufacture cars, it also subtracted land from local farmers to give it to the Salim Group (based in Indonesia) for the setting up of a chemical hub, an event which led to protests to the death of at least 14 villagers, not to mention the injured (Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Power and Contestation in India since 1989* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007), 65-66).