

## Similarities and Differences in Postcolonial Bengali Women's Writings: The Case of Mahasweta Debi and Mallika Sengupta

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### ABSTRACT

The emancipation of women has become a strong critical discourse in Bengali literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, have female writers markedly stepped out of the shadow of their male colleagues, and the writings o n w o m e n become more and more often articulated b y w o m e n themselves. In this article, I focus on particular concepts of femininity in selected texts of two outstanding writers of different generations, a prose writer, and a woman poet: Mahasweta Debi (b. 1926) and Mallika Sengupta (1960–2011). Analyzing Mahasweta's female characters, I focus on the issue of the double marginalization of dalit tribal women; we can find here impacts of intersectional discrimination of class, gender and caste. Debi is very radical in her social criticism but is quite reluctant to accept the label of feminism. Mallika, on the other hand, represents a movement among the female writers of her generation that openly declares her support for feminist ideologies, which can be demonstrated on some of the examples referred to here. Another important strand of Mallika's constructions of femininity are archetypal images — mythological metaphors of femininity (in the Hindu context) which may in some cases be interpreted in accordance with difference feminism, in others as a critique of the essentialized and dichotomous concepts of masculinity and femininity. While Mahasweta's emancipation drive is more deeply grounded in her field research and journalistic activism in the tribal areas she writes about, Mallika's has been more strongly linked with the academia and has joined the theoretical feminist discourse. Through a close reading the women's emancipation discourse of these two protagonists in Bengali literature, we can speak of a shift from a practical, concrete criticism, to a theoretically founded radicalism.

### KEYWORDS

archetype, Mahasweta Debi/Devi, Bengali literature, feminism, femininity, generation, postcolonial studies, Mallika Sengupta, subaltern studies

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## DELIMITATION OF THE TOPIC

For at least the last 200 years, the discourse of social criticism has featured prominently in Bengali literature. The discrimination of women, as a part of this discourse, was thematized by the famous male reformists like Rammohan Ray, Isvarchandra Bidyasagar or Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but more so in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, female writers could step out in a greater number from the shadow of the traditional androcentric discourse, and women's writing was gradually established as an integral and important component of Bengali literature. In the 20<sup>th</sup>-century prose, very original authors appeared who have also become known abroad — as examples, let us quote the names of the famous protagonists of three literary generations, Asapurna Debi (1909–1995), Mahasweta Debi (b. 1926) and Nabanita Deb Sen (b. 1938).<sup>1</sup> In poetry, especially Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880–1932) and Sufiya Kamal (1911–1999) won world fame, but the following literary generations which appeared in 1950s and later on, tended to be dominated by male poets (Sunil Gangopadhyay, Sakti Cattopadhyay, Sankha Ghos, Amiya Chakrabarti etc.).<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, however, several women poets entered the literary scene and became extremely popular namely in 1990s — let us mention at least Krishna Basu (b. 1947) and Mallika Sengupta (1960–2011).<sup>3</sup>

In my article, I would like to focus on some concepts of femininities in selected Mahasweta Debi's short stories and Mallika Sengupta's poems.<sup>4</sup> Mallika was also an essayist and a prose writer (SENGUPTA 1994;

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the Bengali native authors appear in this paper in the spellings of Bengali language: Bidyasagar, Debi (Vidyasagar, Devi in Hindi spelling), Ray, Thakur (Roy, Tagore in English spelling) — editor's note.

<sup>2</sup> This opening paragraph is not trying to present a broad contextual overview of the emancipationalist discourses in modern Bengali literature; it only points to certain landmarks (here personalized in the names of the authors given) who, in my opinion, most radically influenced the development of the Bengali women's writing. The content of such selection can be, of course, a matter of discussion.

<sup>3</sup> With a deep sorrow we have to say that Mallika died in 2011 which is a great loss for Bengali — and Indian — literature. Let this paper also be a tribute to her unusual talent, fascinating literary productivity, charismatic influence on the Bengali literary scene and, to her human qualities, too — she was a very sincere and kind person who had the unusual gift and willingness to encourage and support others.

<sup>4</sup> To comment on my using the first names of the authors here and on, it is necessary to explain that such usage is quite common in Bengali literary scene and does not represent any sort of an inappropriate familiarity; the reason for calling famous personalities by their first names lies in a relatively small number of Bengali surnames which could thus cause a confusion.

SENGUPTA 1996); in this text, I focus on her poetry which was also her main literary domain. Mahasweta writes prose and essays (DEVI 2000). As their writings belong to different literary genres, I will mostly apply gender content analysis where the genre difference would not create a fundamental methodological problem. The article has been developed from a paper for a conference that focused on generation comparisons of female writers of the same language and cultural contexts. The main reasons for choosing these two authors are the following: both Mahasweta and Mallika combined their writing activities with political activism (though their political standpoints represented different sides on the West Bengal political Left scene, and they also expressed their attitude to politics in different arguments, see below); both have been ascribed the position of an 'icon' of the women emancipationalist literary movement in their respective generations; and both have become extremely popular as representatives of critical emancipationist writing.

The concepts of femininity in the texts studied will be analyzed within feminist literary theories of gender;<sup>5</sup> the interpretations will stem from the perspective of postcolonial theories<sup>6</sup> and the theories of intersectionality.<sup>7</sup>

Through the following examples of Mahasweta's and Mallika's texts, I am not trying to come to any generalizing or simplifying conclusions. I am discussing two of the discourses in which both of the authors construct femininity: the discourse of subalternity/agency, and the discourse of motherhood. As Mallika represents a movement among the Bengali female writers of her generation who openly declare support for feminist ideologies, another option could have been to choose some of her poems where ideological debates of feminism are reflected — for instance *Āpni balun, Mārks* [You tell, Marx] (SENGUPTA 2005b: 41–42), or *Open Letter to Freud* (SENGUPTA 2005a: 49–50). However, I would not like to present Mallika's poetry just as politically expressive campaigning. Her poetry has many more dimensions and figurative inspirations, and is by no way less stimulating for gender analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> See, mainly, MORRIS 1993; PRATT, WITHE, LOEWENSTEIN and WYER 1981; SHOWALTER 1977; SHOWALTER 1985.

<sup>6</sup> See, especially MOHANTY 1991; MOHANTY 2003; SPIVAK 1986; SPIVAK 1988; SPIVAK 2002.

<sup>7</sup> See CRENSHAW 1991; HOOKS 2000a; HOOKS 2000b.

## REFLECTING POSITIONALITY

First, let me start with reflecting briefly my location and positionality which has been a point in focus in feminist research.<sup>8</sup> I am trying to analyze literary texts that stem from cultural context other than my own, which always brings about both drawbacks and advantages. The obvious drawback may be an insufficient penetrating into the cultural context and missing some important nuances, the advantage, on the other hand, may be a less direct influence of the context (political, social, power-discursive, etc.) that is usually a danger for the insider. In that regard, I have been deeply inspired by what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak said in an interview with Sneja Gunew (1986); Spivak emphasizes learning about other cultures through language, specific programmes of study and reflecting one's position as an investigating person, which she calls 'homework'. Not doing that homework means, especially for a person coming from a 'dominant' culture speaking about a culture of a colonial experience, the risk of being shallow or simply wrong. On the other hand, according to Spivak:

[...] to say "I won't criticize" is salving your conscience and allowing you not to do any homework. On the other hand, if you criticize having earned the right to do so, then you are indeed taking a risk and you will probably be made welcome, and can hope to be judged with respect (GUNEW 1986: 3).

So, I can only hope for having done my 'homework' in an acceptable way. On the other hand, the culture I come from may be called 'dominant' only if we take the concept of dominance in a very broad sense, i.e. as European culture (if such a generalization is possible, which I doubt).<sup>9</sup> To be specific, Czech culture, a culture of a small country of Central Europe, can hardly be understood as dominant; on the contrary, much of its experience originates from the reverse side of the power discourse (when Czechoslovakia was as a satellite of the USSR between 1948 and 1989), although it was not an experience of a classical colonialism as that of India. Still, a sort of subaltern experience, be it political, social, gender or whatever forms it may have, can perhaps, and hopefully, make researchers from this part of the world more sensitive to other types of oppression and share this experience in a way, being, of course, aware of the risk of easy or simplified parallels.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. RICH 1985; REINHARZ 1992.

<sup>9</sup> The notion dominant would refer here just to a simplified division on 'West' and 'East' as homogeneous categories which have been a subject of deconstruction and criticism by many postcolonial authors (cf. MOHANTY 2003) and also authors focusing on the post-communist experience of the Central and Eastern Europe (cf. GAL and KLIGMAN 2000).

## BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS OF THE AUTHORS: ATTITUDES TO FEMINISM AND POLITICS

The experience of the cultural (and political) oppression may also be one of the main reasons why I have been so attracted to the writings of both Mahasweta Debi and Mallika Sengupta — they both thematize power discourses and various forms of resistance, although their texts certainly deal with other topics as well. They both focus on discrimination of women and often choose female characters as heroines of the stories and main characters, real or symbolic, of the poems. Selecting these two authors for a reflection on women's writing in the perspective of a generational experience is also supported by the fact that both Mahasweta and Mallika are prominent writers, not only female prominent writers,<sup>10</sup> of their generations. They are widely read and very popular in Bengal, both have been awarded several literary prizes,<sup>11</sup> both have been many times invited abroad and both have been translated into foreign languages, including Czech.

Mahasweta and Mallika combine social activism and activist journalism with art. Both are broadly understood as writers of political agency, although each reacts on that 'label' differently. Mahasweta rather refuses to be a political writer: "People think I'm a highly political writer. But in the 1970s, I was probably the most a p o l i t i c a l [emphasis B.K.-Č.] among the established, professional camp" — she wrote in 1981 — "but, like I said, the struggle never stops, and we must remember this at every breath" (BISWAS and SHASTRI 1997). Mahasweta does not call herself a feminist but, as she declared in an interview with the author of this article (Kolkata, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2006), she feels herself to be rather a womanist.<sup>12</sup> That may

<sup>10</sup> By emphasizing the position of Mallika and Mahasweta in the genderless literary discourse, I point to the feminist criticism of the traditional literary canon as actually male, and literature written by women as something special, secondary, as representing 'The Other' (cf. MORRIS 1993; SHOWALTER 1977; de BEAUVOIR 1972; et al.)

<sup>11</sup> Mallika Sengupta's awards: Junior Fellowship for Literature from the Department of Culture, Government of India (1997–1999), Sukanto Puroskar from the Government of West Bengal (1998), Bangla Academy award from the Government of West Bengal (2004). She has also been invited to poetry readings, conferences and seminars in Sweden (1987), Australia (1994), USA (2002 and 2006), Czech Republic (2009) and Bangladesh (1998 and 2002) as part of Indian writer's delegation. Mahasweta Debi's awards: Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), Padma Shri (1986), Jnanpith Award (1996), Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997), *Honoris causa* — Indira Gandhi National Open University (1999), Padma Vibhushan (2006), Yashwantrao Chavan National Award (2010), Bangabibhushan (the highest award of the Government of West Bengal granted to civilians, 2011) and Sahityabramha (Lifetime Achievement Award, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> The same was said to me by the writer Nabanita Deb Sen (b. 1938) two days later.

be interpreted as a sort of reluctance to the notion of feminism, or also to the image of feminism in the particular Bengali context, which Mahasweta confirmed herself; using of the term ‘womanism’<sup>13</sup> seems to support this interpretation.

Mallika Sengupta, on the other hand, has openly expressed many times to be inspired by feminism and to feel being a feminist herself. As far as the importance of the intersectional concept of discrimination — gender, race and class is concerned, there is not a principal difference of opinion between Mahasweta and Mallika; the intersectional perspective has also been reflected in Mallika’s poetry<sup>14</sup> but, certainly, has not become the main thematic focus there, while in Mahasweta’s stories, it forms the crucial thematic — and theoretical — perspective. Mallika was influenced by some liberal theoretical feminist concepts like that of the feminist sisterhood; when speaking about her sources of inspiration, she often brought up the name of Kate Millet which would rather point to the stream of the feminism of difference.<sup>15</sup> Mallika was a theorist herself in the field of sociology and interdisciplinary intersections of sociology and literature.<sup>16</sup> In 1994, she wrote the first theoretical text on gender in Bengali — *Strīlīṅga nirmāṇ* [Creation of the Female Gender].

We can thus conclude that although the urge to fight discrimination of women is common to both Mahasweta and Mallika, they use a different vocabulary how to formulate or theorize it. In Mahasweta’s statements, a certain aloofness to be openly ‘ideological’ can be traced. Mallika, on the contrary, faced the challenge of the issue of ideology in a very balanced way. In an interview with Mallika published in 2004, Sanjukta Dasgupta<sup>17</sup> asked whether “poetry should be didactic? Does the scope of poetry become restricted if the poet is an ideologue?” Mallika replied:

Ideology ruins poetry, but not always. Rather every poet has to face this challenge at some period of her life. From ancient times, poets have been regarded as profound observers commenting on social issues. Almost all good poets try to convey their convic-

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<sup>13</sup> Womanism has developed mostly in the field of the feminist theology. Its interpretation often overlaps with that of the term of black feminism. It was first brought in to describe the perspective and particular experiences of ‘women of colour’ by the Afroamerican writer Alice Walker (1983).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. her poem *Svāmīr kāla hāt* [Husband’s Black Hand] (SENGUPTA 1988: 38).

<sup>15</sup> She kept repeating it in many discussions with me in 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2009. Also cf. an interview with her by Sanjukta Dasgupta (DASGUPTA 2004) and her theoretical study *Strīlīṅga nirmāṇ* (SENGUPTA 1994).

<sup>16</sup> She was the Head of the Department of Sociology in Maharani Kasiswari College of the Calcutta University.

<sup>17</sup> Sanjukta Dasgupta is also a poet, a specialist in English literature, professor of the Department of English at Calcutta University.

tions and ideologies through poetry. I think a good poet can always insert ideology into poetry without destroying aesthetic conditions. This is how a good poet is tested, at least in my opinion (DASGUPTA 2004).

Here, Mallika supports the thesis that avoiding ideology is a mere illusion. This thesis has been widely accepted by many feminist thinkers, namely those stemming from Marxism<sup>18</sup> or deconstruction, for instance postcolonial or transnational feminists like Gloria Jean Watkins (alias bell hooks), Alice Walker, Gayatri C. Spivak, Chandra T. Mohanty, and others. According to that perspective, it could hardly be said that only some approaches are ideological and political, and some are not. Everything is ideological because everything reflects our positionalities, locations, determinations, personal and cultural and social contexts, identity policies, etc. To admit that one is ideological, thus, does not necessarily mean being a political preacher. It rather means giving up the positivist illusion of being 'objective', it means acknowledging one's determinations, choices and standpoints and trying to reflect them — but not trying to pretend they do not exist and influence us.

During the recent political development in West Bengal, especially the election campaign 2009–2011, Mahasweta Debi became a strong supporter of today's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (Bandyopadhyay) and the Trinamul Congress that won the state elections in 2009;<sup>19</sup> Mallika, however, remained a follower of the CPI (Marxist) represented by the former Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (Bhattacharya). I am conceived, however, that this difference in the topical political standpoint does not represent anything like a higher or lower interest in social issues and antidiscrimination activities in case of neither of the writers; they just obviously differed in their evaluations of the respective political parties and their capabilities to introduce the ideals of social and gender justice in praxis.

#### THE SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

Writings of Mahasweta Debi and Mallika Sengupta could be analyzed and compared from various angles. Although Mallika also wrote two novels, her main attention was given to poetry, while Mahasweta writes

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<sup>18</sup> Although Mallika followed the Marxist ideology in some respects (namely its emancipation potential for the social equality), she was also critical to Marx from the feminist perspective — see for instance her poem *Apni balun, Märks* (quoted above).

<sup>19</sup> As far as I know, in 2012 Mahasweta stopped to support the Trinamul Congress.

only prose. Mahasweta concentrates predominantly on the issues of discrimination of tribal women, on their double or triple marginalization — the intersection of socio-cultural, ethnical and gender discriminations. This has been reflected in both her fiction and essays (see bibliography). Mallika's main focus or leitmotif may be broadly characterized as a search for women's voices that have been suppressed, be it mythological characters like Draupadi (see below) or Sita,<sup>20</sup> or real women who suffered discrimination like Shah Bano (SENGUPTA 1999). To say in Spivak's words, both Mahasweta and Mallika, in a way, have been exploring the space of the subaltern, silenced voices. That can be illustrated by the title of one of Mallika's books of poems, or rather a long poem representing different perspectives, *Kathāmānabī* [Female voice] (SENGUPTA 1999).

The text of *Kathāmānabī* is framed within a mosaic of an underlying epical story, being told in the first person narrative, constructed as a pervading echo of many suppressed female feelings and experiences. It is outspoken by historical female personalities (the sultana Raziya), mythological characters (the river Ganga, the princess Draupadi) or contemporary women (Shah Bano). No matter if they are Hindu or Muslim, noble or common, real or fictional, they all speak in one voice in search of a freely chosen identity.

#### SUBVERTING GENDER ARCHETYPES: DRAUPADI

Interestingly, what Mahasweta and Mallika also have in common, is a method of paraphrasing or subverting gender archetypes of classical Indian female heroines. As an obvious example could be brought up the character of Draupadi. Draupadi is the royal heroine of the classical epics of *Mahābhārata*; a subverted image of the classical Draupadi is the main character of the perhaps best known Mahasweta's short story *Draupadī* (DEBI 1999: 100–110).<sup>21</sup> In Mallika's *Kathāmānabī*, a poem called *Draupadīr janma* [The Birth of Draupadi] can be found (SENGUPTA 1999: 11–12). Here, I am going to compare some selected aspects of the two concepts.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mallika's novel *Stitāyan* (SENGUPTA 1996).

<sup>21</sup> A famous analysis of this story was written by Spivak in *Introduction* to her translation of the short story Debi (DEVI 2002a: 1–18).

<sup>22</sup> With Mahasweta's story, I dealt as a main focus and in greater detail in other articles (cf. KNOTKOVÁ-ČAPKOVÁ 2005; KNOTKOVÁ-ČAPKOVÁ 2011). Here I am going to concentrate on the issues important for a comparison with Mallika's conceptualization of the main character.



Draupadi in Mahasweta's story is an opposite to classical Draupadi in many respects: she is a tribal dalit — an 'untouchable' — she and her community are even not able to pronounce properly her classical name, given to her by a landlord's wife, and thus call her Dopdi.<sup>23</sup> She is a Naxalite rebel who participates in killing, she is one of the leaders of the uprising, a violent killer. As a rebel, she is not idealized in the story at all. Dopdi never subdues, even not to physical violence that should humiliate her. An allusion of the polyandry of classical Draupadi and her striping in the front of the Kaurava court<sup>24</sup> is subverted in the story as a crowd rape of Dopdi by the army soldiers. Dopdi does not complain, fall weak or feel shame — she does not accept the shame to be hers but throws it back on the brutes, refusing to take her cloths again on. As Gayatri C. Spivak puts it in the introduction to her translation of the text:

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi — in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops (DEVI 2002a: 11).

Theirs remain not only the shame, but an irrational fear of the situation as well. Through her experience of suffering a brutal social oppression, Dopdi has developed into an active agent of her life. Her own usage of violent methods of fight is not excused in the story (should it be?), however, in the given context, it may be understandable.

In the quoted interpretative analysis, the focus is being put on the aspect of subversion of passivity and obedience into activity and agency.<sup>25</sup> An interesting mixture of parallel and subversion can be, however, also traced in the marriage of Draupadis in both the stories. Classical Draupadi, as well as the rebel Dopdi, love deeply, and their love is, in a way, reciprocated. The princess's love has to be, however, divided among five

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<sup>23</sup> In the first two parts of the short story, she figures as Dopdi; in the third part, where the subversion of the character of the classical princess becomes openly obvious, she is suddenly called Draupadi which points to the paraphrased classical character.

<sup>24</sup> That act of violence is not in fact directed against Draupadi but against her husbands, as their humiliation. Draupadi serves here just as an instrumental object of the fight between the male kinship groups.

<sup>25</sup> Spivak also brings a postcolonial perspective in interpreting the story's adversary character of Senanayak (a *nomen omen*, meaning in Bengali 'army leader') who orders the soldiers to 'counter' Dopdi (DEVI 2002a: 11).

husbands<sup>26</sup> which was not her own choice (she had to accept the karmic results of an inadvertent statement of Kunti, her mother-in-law); on the other hand, the rebel Dopdi lives in a schoolbook monogamy with her husband Dulna, who is also one of the Naxalite leaders. The basic difference is that of hierarchy/equality: while the princess is fully subdued to her husbands and the particular form of the patriarchal order that governs all of them, there doesn't seem to be any trace about Dopdi's subordination in her relation. She and her husband are partners, equals, two rebels and fighters. Both are physically destroyed or wounded, but not defeated. The five husbands of Draupadi in the classical story, on the contrary, win their main battle — as representatives of the divine order; if they, however, win as lovers (husbands and wife), remains an open question.

Spivak, however, casts a certain doubt on Dopdi's full independence as a female fighter, pointing to the fact that through the whole story, she is guided by the instructions of the male leaders and of the patriarchal concept of loyalty among the Santalis she is subdued to.<sup>27</sup> We can thus conclude that Dopdi as an individual may be interpreted as a person breaking the bonds of her gender (she is an equal to her husband) and of her race-caste-class (although a dalit, she does not accept her multi-marginalizations and revolts) — but as a social being, she can hardly overcome the gender order imposed by her own community in the respect of genderly conditioned forming values important for the fight, that leave her, as a woman, more vulnerable (or vulnerable in more ways) than her co-fighters, as the development of the story shows.

Dinithi Karunanayake in her essay *Dismantling Theory? Agency and the Subaltern Woman in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"* (KARUNANAYAKE 2008) emphasizes the re-definition of Dopdi's self-identity as a key moment when the subaltern female becomes an agent of her life. She argues:

[...] it is not merely sufficient to place the subaltern woman character [...] in the guise of a militant. This will not always result in the empowerment of the subaltern as female [...]. It is rather, when the personal is inextricably mixed with the political, as was

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<sup>26</sup> In the mentioned interview with the author of this article in 2006, Mahasweta commented on the polyandry of classical Draupadi as a historical fact of the family setting of some of the non-Indoaryan communities inhabiting the subcontinent, the member of which a real person-model of literary Draupadi may have been. However, in the classical Hindu epics of the *Mahābhārata*, this polyandry (unacceptable for the Hindu tradition) was theologially rationalized. In the short story, a subverted metaphor of the polyandry may be read in the scene of the crowd rape of Dopdi by the army soldiers (cf. SPIVAK 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. also KARUNANAYAKE 2008.

the case with Dopdi at the end of the short story that she becomes an agent through a dramatic re-articulation of her identity. Such a refashioning of identity requires a definition of identity as not immutable and fixed but as something that is contingent and variable. Thus, the crucial factor in the transformation of Dopdi into an agent is her coming to terms with the fact that contingencies, such as the ones that she is faced with, call for a radical departure from the identity fashioned and inscribed by patriarchy and (male) authority and the appropriation of a powerful female identity (KARUNANAYAKE 2008: 9–10).

The narrative strategy of Mallika's epico-lyrical poem *Draupadīr janma* uses the scenes and characters of the classical myth, it does not transpose them into another space and time which Mahasweta does, just presents them in a critical way and through the lens of the heroine, not of the dominant discourse of the story. Draupadi, as a teller of the story in the first person narrative, is neither silent nor accepting her fate as a duty of a devoted wife (in that respect, she does not seem to be 'subaltern' in the sense of being 'voiceless')<sup>28</sup>. She bitterly criticizes her objectification — being laid a wager in the dice game by Yudhisthir, the first of her husbands; she accuses her five husbands of not defending her and explains her abuse as a typical pattern of the gender hierarchy, saying: "You men fight and take revenge by abusing women sexually", or, "Shame you all Kauravas, shame you stodge Indians. Remaining silent you all witnessed the conquest of injustice!" (SENGUPTA 2005a: 18).<sup>29</sup> Mallika's Draupadi ironizes her imposed polyandry as making a whore from her<sup>30</sup> — and, in the same time, calling Karna (a member of the rival Kaurava family) a 'male-whore' because he sleeps with many women (SENGUPTA 2005a: 19). Draupadi, in the poem, finds nobody to stand up for her but the God Krishna whom she calls as her 'first friend' (*pratham bandhu*) (SENGUPTA 2005a: 21; SENGUPTA 1999: 87). In the poem, only one just male character appears, and it is a godly character: the Lord Krishna. He is saying: "Oh my thoughtful Lady, all of them will be perished, on who you have become angry, they will all die by the revengeful arrows of Arjuna and you will be Queen again"<sup>31</sup> (SENGUPTA

<sup>28</sup> Karunanayake (2008) objects to understanding subalternity as a fatal deprivation of voice which she, in a way, ascribes to Spivak's concept. Spivak, however, protests against the accusations of denying voice to the subaltern; cf. e.g. Spivak's interview with Leon de Kock (1992).

<sup>29</sup> In this quotation, am using the English translations by the author herself (SENGUPTA 2005a).

<sup>30</sup> Here, we can trace a similar subversion of the traditional reading in both Mahasweta and Mallika's texts.

<sup>31</sup> All translations in this paper from Bengali into English are done by Blanka Knotková-Čapková unless otherwise is indicated.

2005a: 21). In the ending of the poem, Krishna's support for Draupadi (he becomes 'Draupadi's friend') is paralleled with the moment when "the soil of India bowed to his feet" (*pranām korecchila*) (SENGUPTA 2005a: 21; and SENGUPTA 1999: 87). It symbolizes a display of justice that evoked a well-deserved worship.

Mallika's poem expressively criticizes the discrimination in the classical myth of *Mahābhārata*. Some verses of the poem also present various aspects of discrimination of women as a general issue — namely objectification, victimization and sexual abuse (the last being a common point in Mallika and Mahasweta's stories). Both characters are not subaltern, as far as voice is concerned: the difference lies, however, in their acts. Mallika's Draupadi finds her voice, she speaks as a rebel to a certain extent but finally does not behave as a rebel. She does not accept the humiliation as hers in her heart, in that her image corresponds with Mahasweta's Dopdi, but does not act accordingly; of course, within the scene of the classical myth that the poem holds, she hardly could. A difference between both the representations of Draupadi lies, in my opinion, in the attitude to the religious framework: in that respect, Dopdi — as a dalit — embodies a more fundamental criticism. Mallika's Draupadi trespasses against the social order and reveals it as a mere construct, not a godly order; as far as belief is concerned, however, she remains a devoted Hindu — and, like in the classical story, she is rewarded for it: Lord Krishna finally saves her. In Mahasweta's text, the sharp social criticism is rather inscribed into the narrative and the subversions are metaphorized. From the perspective of religion, the story of Dopdi is more radical than the poem and fully secularized. In the poem, Krishna remains to be a helper and a friend. In the short-story, no Krishna comes or helps and the violence on woman takes place in the most brutal way. There, human beings remain alone.

In both texts, masculinity is described not only as oppressing and violent but as friendly and affectionate, too. In Mallika's poem, it is Krishna who represents that aspect; his picture may also be interpreted as justice and love overcoming gender categories. He personifies an ideal that none of the mundane males reach. In Mahasweta's story, a positive male character — from the perspective of Dopdi — is her husband Dulna who for her is a friendly and kindred spirit, together with her male comrades. There, however, human beings are left without a godly mercy and help, they just love each other and fight as partners hand-in-hand. We can conclude that both the heroines of Mallika's and Mahasweta's narratives do not fight 'against men', they fight against discrimination and gender violence. They revolt against an oppressive order of gender power — and

its practical uses or misuses. Still, both remain, in a way, imprisoned in the relations of patriarchy: Dopdi approves of the instructions of her male comrades, Draupadi (in the poem) of the supremacy of a male God. In that regard, as a power discourse, it may be irrelevant which of the settings is secular, and which has a spiritual grounding.

## FIGURATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

This text has dealt so far with a literary archetype from a classical story that also represents some Hindu traditional values. The notion of literary archetype can, however, point not only to a particular character; it may represent a general character type, too. In feminist literary criticism, stereotyped gender character types are often criticized, let us mention at least the type of the witch, femme fatale, etheric lover, or a self-sacrificing mother.<sup>32</sup> In the last part of my essay, I will focus on the last of these; both of the selected authors figure motherhood in various ways — different, and also similar.

In some of Mahasweta's and Mallika's texts, mother is metaphorized as earth (or mother-country), or earth/country is metaphorized as mother. In the Indian cultural context, it points to the archetype of Mother Goddess in her various images, the source of all mundane life, unifying creation and destruction, mercy and punishment, symbolizing rebirth and love. In the patriotic discourse, the image overlaps with that of *Bhārāt Mātā*, Mother India.

A typical example of that figuration may be brought by Mahasweta's short story *Stanadāinī* (DEBĪ 2004: 81–100), translated as *Breast-giver* by Spivak (DEVI 2002a: 39–75) and thoroughly interpreted from the perspective of the author's reading, from a receptive reader's perspective and from different theoretical positions — Marxist, liberal feminist, somatization of dominance and gender postcolonial theory.<sup>33</sup> The heroine has a mythological name, Jashoda, who was the mythological nursing foster-mother of the God Krishna. Like in the story of Draupadi, Mahasweta figures Jashoda as a subversive picture of the mythological image. In this respect, the subversion is directed to the archetype of a nurturing and caring woman-mother for whom the ethics of care forms an integral part of her identity.<sup>34</sup> Jashoda in the short story makes living by breast-feed-

<sup>32</sup> Cf. CIXOUS 1975; MORRIS 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. SPIVAK 2002: 76–137.

<sup>34</sup> For elaborating this theoretical ethical concept and its criticism, cf. GILLIGAN 1993; also MORRIS 1993.

ing brahmin children of a rich family. She believes to be a part of the family till the moment she falls sick with cancer and dies of it, alone and abandoned in alienated surroundings of a hospital. She is neither respected nor praised for fulfilling the feminine archetype of a caring mother. On the contrary, her behaving in accordance with that archetype destroys her. The text suggests an obvious critical metaphor of Mother India, misused and destroyed by her children.

In her interpretation, Spivak emphasizes, rather than the patriotic perspective, a “critique of the nationwide mobilization of the Hindu Divine Mother and Holy Child” (DEVI 2002a: 117). She maintains that “the figure of the all-nurturing Jashoda provides the active principle of patriarchal sexual ideology” and that “as in the case of her earlier short story *Draupadi*, Mahasweta mobilizes the figure of the mythic female as opposed to the full-fledged goddess” (DEVI 2002a: 117). We can say that Jashoda, in the story, internalized the patriarchal icon of motherhood and the illusion of its divinity; and the more she internalized it, the more she was exploited as a human being, and a female, who was alienated from her own body. The breasts, for her, are not a symbolic source of life, but a real source of death. Death without mythological connotations of rebirth and hope.

In Mahasweta’s writings, we should, however, at least mention other and very typical figurations of motherhood — without a mythological frame, in realistic stories of unhappy mothers. We can choose for instance the story of *Dhouli* (DEBĪ 2003: 401–417), a tribal single mother, betrayed by her lover, a landlord’s son. *Dhouli* finally finds no other way how to earn living for her child but leaving the village for a city in order to become a prostitute there; still, *Dhouli* is leaving morally unbroken.<sup>35</sup> Or, *Cintā* in a story of the same name (DEVI 2002b: 83–93), a young widow, ostracized by her relatives and the whole village because she had ‘sinned’, having had a lover who left her. To improve the economic and social position of her legal son, she subdues to manipulation and sells off her two daughters who were her later lover’s children. Unlike *Dhouli*, *Cintā* remains voiceless without a spark of hope, deserted and unable to fight. Or, *Somri* in the story called *Ḍāini* (DEBĪ 2003: 441–472),<sup>36</sup> a tribal, mentally insane girl who was abused by a landlord’s son, got pregnant and was hiding in a forest — and was nearly killed by a fanaticized crowd as a presumed witch. In

<sup>35</sup> I interpreted the story of *Dhouli* in a greater detail in KNOTKOVÁ-ČAPKOVÁ 2011.

<sup>36</sup> The short stories *Dhouli* and *Ḍāini* were first published in the collection of stories *Nairrite megh* [There are Clouds in the South-West] (DEBĪ 1979).

the end, the villagers find out about her abuse which leads to the saving of Somri and determination of the villagers to revolt against the landlord's wilfulness in any possible way.

These stories are emotionally very appealing, but by no means sentimental. The narrative is sometimes linear (Cintā), sometimes constructed as a metonymic mosaic of pictures (Ḍāini). Radical social criticism stems from the narratives themselves, combining social, ethnical, religious and gender issues. This intersectional approach corresponds with the typical message of many Mahasweta's stories which portray a double or triple marginalization of the female character.<sup>37</sup> The heroines are often low castes, or outcastes, poor or facing social exclusion, non-Hindus, tribals, and women within a patriarchal power order who disobey or break gender stereotypes — sometimes intentionally, sometimes in the course of the social determinations. They sometimes are portrayed as powerless victims (Cintā, Somri), sometimes as women fighting or trying to fight the discrimination (Dopdi, Dhoulī) and becoming agents of their lives, although their fate can hardly be but tragical. Still, the female characters of victims do not construct any generalized picture of victimization which has been strongly criticized by Chandra T. Mohanty (1991). On the contrary, they invite for a deeper reflection of the given power hierarchy, if not to a revolt against it (Somri in Ḍāini).

In Mallika's poems, various figurations of motherhood are also introduced. Let us bring at least two examples. In the poem *Mā* [Mother] (SENGUPTA 2005b: 121–122),<sup>38</sup> motherhood is poetically represented as a very intimate and firm bond, mother being attributed and addressed in Bengali as *ālo ādhār* (light and darkness), *mamatāmaya* (affectionate), *cokher bhāṣā* (eyes' language), *māṭir meye* (daughter of the soil), *aśrumayī* (full of tears), but also *yuddhajāt* (victorious). She also is *bhāla khārāp* (good and bad), *andha āśā* (blind hope) and, finally, *bāmlā bhāṣā* (Bengali language). This line clearly points to a substantial feminist theme of the matrilinear bond, symbolically feminist sisterhood, which is being perturbed by the androcentric gender order and which should be rebuilt.<sup>39</sup> Many archetypal allusions can also be found there in a deeper symbolic level, typical of the images of Mother Goddess: she unites and perhaps harmonizes the opposites (light and darkness, good and bad); she is gently loving and tearful, but victorious (i.e. strong, not weak or submissive); and she personifies voice — through the speech of eyes and

<sup>37</sup> Mahasweta Debī deals with that issue also in her essays; cf. DEBĪ 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Mallika Sengupta has written several poems named *Mother* in different collections of poems. This one was originally published in the collection *Deoyālir rāt* (SENGUPTA 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. CIXOUS 1975; IRIGARAY 1985.

language as well. In the last of the symbols, an image of a mother with that of Mother Country clearly overlaps. We can conclude that first, the matrilinear bond may be read here as the pivotal one which points rather to the archetypal pattern of a pre-patriarchal setting.<sup>40</sup> Second, another strong feminist theme is suggested here, that of the language — speech and voice. The mother not only gives the language, she is the language. Apart from the archetype of the Mother Country, she thus personifies a speaking female who is not voiceless — and not subaltern: unlike those in the famous Spivak's essay, she can speak.<sup>41</sup>

In *Prithibīr mā* [Mother of the Earth] (SENGUPTA 2005b: 128), the image of Earth represents creation and the female archetypal principle. It is her who creates man and that creation is inspired by her fierce desire for love (*tībra bhālabāsār ākāṅkhā*). Man's seed is planted into her body and in her womb and the universe is born. In this poem, a sort of masculine — feminine essential dichotomy can be observed, though the source is monistic — and it is female. It can, therefore, point to the mythological Hindu archetypes of Śakti or Aditi, as the female original and independent cosmic principle.

#### TO BE A 'POLITICAL' WRITER: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In the quotation given above, Mahasweta stated to be an 'apolitical' writer. Not speaking about her political activities as a citizen, I would dare to disagree with that statement even as far as her writing is concerned. It certainly depends on what we call political. If we understood the expression just as a discourse of the official representation of the political scene, then 'political' would very probably be quite alienated from common life and common readers. If we, however, take the standpoint of a resistant reader together with the theorist Judith Fetterley,<sup>42</sup> then the word 'political' would be derived from a Greek term *polis*, and would include anything that concerns the community — its inner discriminations and various forms of injustice included. In my opinion, in that sense of the word, both Mahasweta and Mallika are not only political as citizens, they both are political writers.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. PRATT, WHITE, LOEWENSTEIN and WYER 1981.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. SPIVAK 1988.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. FETTERLEY 1978.



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