

Mahasweta Devi: A Socio – Political Commentator of the Marginalized Community

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Abstract

The subject of Mahasweta Devi's creative writings has centered on the struggle of socially marginalized. She tried to depict the struggles of the people against exploitation and tyranny. Her women protagonists hail from marginal sections of society. Their tales expose the power dynamics of sex, economics and culture which collectively tyrannize them all. Her work is inspiring because she reminds us that gender is only one of the many axes on which discrimination rests. She is straightforward with her approach to talking about the lives of experiences of the marginalized. She talks about complex realities. Her fiction allows the reader to look at cultural practices, social institutions, identity formations, sexual roles and how they operate in spaces with different power dynamics. The arrangement of all these in her narratives come together to display the exploitations based on the difference in caste, class and gender. Since time immemorial, men and women in India had their roles differentiated. Women were always on the box of disadvantages. They used to spend their whole lives in the kitchen, taking care of the whole family and often tortured by men. This is highlighted in her novels.

Mahasweta Devi was an Indian Bengali fiction writer and socio-political activist. Her notable literary works include Hajar Churashir Maa, Rudali, and Aranyer Adhikar. She worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people (Lodha and Shabar) of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states of India. Devi wrote over 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories. She studied the Lodhas and Shabars, the tribal communities of West Bengal, and the women and the dalits. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicted the brutal oppression of the tribal people and untouchables by the powerful authoritarian upper-caste landlords, money-lenders, and venal government officials.

In the Breast- Giver, to earn a living, Jashoda can only use what she has as a woman: her breasts and milk. The Mistress praises Jashoda about the amount of milk she produces and Jashoda comments that there was “a flood of milk although she was between pregnancies and she didn't have any special food or pampering”. When the Mistress gives Jashoda the job, Jashoda goes home that night and says to her husband, “Look, I'm going to pull our weight with these”. She obviously takes great pride in her body and what she is able to do with it. However, the fact that her job is a sexist one cannot be overlooked. It is obvious that only a woman can do a job such as the one Jashoda does. Women are again objectified and subjected to the view of only being good for certain things that men cannot do. In this way, you could say that the work is 'gendered' and the text is supporting traditional gender roles. Jashoda is, in a way, the stereotypical woman, raising children (though some are not her own) and keeping a home for her husband. She is seen as submissive and nurturing in a way that the traditional gender roles support.

The only reason Jashoda goes to work outside the home in the first place is because her husband is injured and cannot work and provide for their family any longer. Before her husband's accident, Jashoda was in the home, raising children, and was stuck in a traditionally female role of housewife. She had no other use to him besides bearing and raising children and keeping a home for him and their family. The traditional roles are switched, however, when Jashoda goes to work as a wet nurse. Though Jashoda is the provider for the family, she is not free from her responsibilities as a wife and mother to her own children. She has to do both jobs simultaneously, which speaks to the complexities of many women's lives. Just because a woman works outside the home to earn a living doesn't mean that she cares any less about the goings on in her household and family.

Jashoda becomes more and more revered for her body's otherworldly tolerance, as the story that plays out on Jashoda's body. Jashoda suffers a painful and sickened death. Her plentiful breasts now become a gaping wound. She did not get the food and survival sources from Haldar's house as they parted here and there. Nor her husband followed her. She remained alone and searched to pass out the life. She got cancer in her breast. Kangalicharan, her husband and also her son came to support her. But it was already late and they could not do anything. She is destined to die with breast cancer. It is the extreme phase of female resistance without defying male dominance. She showed it to her husband who came after listening to her disease.

Mahasweta Devi embarks on a project of presenting the shocking realities that happen behind the socio-economic and political iron curtains, through her most powerful work *Draupadi*. The three stories in *Breast Stories* namely *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver* (*Stanadayini*) and *Behind the Bodice* (*Choli ke Pichhe*) deal with exploitation. The stories have a common theme, the Breast. The translator points out in her introduction that the breast is far more than a symbol in these stories. It becomes a means of harsh comment on an unfair social system. If it is transformed into a commodity in *Draupadi*, it is an object that stands for the supposed 'normality' of sexuality as male violence in *Behind the Bodice*.

Draupadi, which was published in Mahasweta Devi's work *Agnigarbha* and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her collection titled 'Breast Stories' is an extra-ordinary and rare document of violence on and resistance by a poor, illiterate tribal woman who in her ultimate denial to clothe herself, not only exposes the ugly and horrifying face of political repressive forces including government, bureaucrats, feudal masters and the state sponsored delinquents, but also challenges the might of callous post-colonial state embodied in the figure of *Senanayak*. The play documents the economic, political, social and sexual oppression of the duality women in tribal areas who suffer from triple marginalization in terms of caste, class and gender. It is about the 1967 peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of West Bengal by the landless peasants and the itinerant farm workers against the unofficial state-feudal nexus.

In the stream of marginalization, women are in the worse situation. They are marginalized on the basis of unspoken and unwritten laws of the man-constructed society. Women's positions in society, particularly those of marginalized ones are preoccupied with the sense of docility and negligence. Marginalized women – the tribal women or the poor women – do not have any 'decent' or 'proper' position and identity in society.

In Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* where a Santhal tribal woman, *Draupadi* is subjected to third degree sexual violence. It depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body and her inner feminine core to fight against her marginality. In an attempt to subjugate her mind, body and soul, *Dopdi* (tribal name) is raped repeatedly by a number of men as she loses consciousness time and time again during her ordeal. She displays an unusual form of resistance by subverting the gaze in such a way that it is her oppressors who are made to feel the shame. Mahasweta is a writer with a commitment for social cause. Her stories and novels comment on India as a socio-political trajectory of the country. Mahasweta Devi has been actively working for years for tribals and marginalized communities. Her activism effortlessly translates into her writings.

The situation of the oppressed and the violence meted out to women throughout India remains the same: "The continuation of sexual assault of feudal patriarchal society in the form of state violence is the experience of contemporary feudal society". Mahasweta Devi is one of those rare writers who always aspires to find and explore something challenging and new and never accepts the existing ideals. Her short fiction *Draupadi* is primarily, the story of Santhal tribal women raped by men in power which is her sexual torture in police custody. Rape is considered as a bolt on the forehead of an innocent woman.

The story has its backdrop, the Naxalbari movement of Bengal, which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and money lenders. The misery of a tribal woman

as compared to aristocratic woman is far more dreadful. Rape is the worst recognition of sexual violence against women. Giving all the vital information about the famous criminal Draupadi right at the beginning of the story, Mahasweta Devi states: that they went underground for a long time and they are on the list of wanted. They used the technique of guerilla warfare to compete with their enemy. Guerilla warfare is supposed to be the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting with primitive weapons. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of such fighters, for they too killed with hatchets and scythes, bows and arrows.

Mahasweta Devi's tribal Dopdi is fighting for her survival, for food and for water. The writer etches out the plight of the tribals in words. She depicts how utter helplessness can finally lead to resistance or even rebellion. Unlike other passive rape victims, Devi does not let her heroine 'Droupadi' suffer in silence. With unconquerable spirit, the naked and bleeding Draupadi faces all her rapists defiantly, out resisting the sexual flouting of her body. Mahasweta Devi gives voice to the voiceless unfortunate of the earth. Her literary output is an attempt to shake the conscience of the citizens and to make them notice, identify and analyze what goes unnoticed, unheard by the naked eye. There is no doubt that this story is a hard hitting comment on the grim situation of the tribal and marginalized in the face of democracy. The condition of women in the present patriarchal society remains the same irrespective of time and place. The tribal woman is marginalized in more than one way as she lives in a constant fear of victimization. In this social environment one comes across a character like Dopdi in literature who decides to take her revenge in her own way. She, raising her voice after being brutally gang raped, shows the extent to which a woman can be pushed. Conquering her pain and humiliation, she emerges as the most powerful 'subject.'

Her tale presents the bitter realities of the revolutionary movements of the tribals in an unabated manner and highlights the irony that in 21st century tribal women still have to fight the unjust world order for bare survival.

Through the compelling interplay of politics and history, Devi exposes the irony of the patriarchal hegemonistic societies that eulogize the idea of protecting a woman's honor at all cost but given a chance, violates her without having any qualm. Dopdi, the central character, is the representative of millions of tribal women who are oppressed, marginalized and victimized by the agents of politics.

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