



A CRITICAL SERVEY OF MAHASWETA DEVI PLAY'S

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi being a writer par excellence wrote, worked and fought for the marginalized tirelessly for the past six decades. The thesis is mainly based on her efforts to be the voice of the subaltern. Her writing is disturbing because it shows the reader his or her own true face. Through her works she was deeply involved and explored the Women and Dalit issues across the nation in general and the lives of the tribal communities of West Bengal in particular. In her thought-provoking Bengali Plays, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal people and untouchables by potent authoritarian upper caste landlords, feudal lords, money-lenders and government officials. Referring to her source of inspiration, Mahasweta Devi says, that she has always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people and she has constantly come across its reappearance in various forms of folklore, ballads, myths and legends carried on by ordinary people across generations. She again holds the view that the reason and inspiration for her writings are those people who are exploited and used and yet do not accept defeat.

Key words: marginalized sections, oppression and exploitation of tribal's, untouchables etc.

Paper

Mapping the poverty-ridden, wretched existence of women, her works provide a strong critique of the ways in which caste and class collude with gender roles in India to alienate women. She focuses on double colonization of women which results from being subjected to general discrimination as subalterns and specific discrimination as women. She contextualizes her geocentric stories within the framework of socio-economic structures. The issues pertaining to women that she highlights are the rural poverty, bonded labour, horrid exploitation of tribal and lower-caste women, their dismal condition in brothels, their wasted youth, diseased bodies and the sorry state of their children. She depicts their deplorable plight, empathizes with them and at the same time turns the tables on society itself and the literate folks, for condoning such horrors in silence. This paper has attempted to analyze various marginalizations

Undergone by weaker sections and their struggle to fight the oppression, repression and suppression that society imposes on them...

Mother of 1084, the play documents the troubled time of Bengal's political history. The changing modes of subalternity have changed from time to time and accepted with the standard view of criticism that subaltern studies does not mean today what it meant in 1982, 1985, 1989 or 1993. Her plays provide a clear vision about the reality of subalterns who could alter perspective when their voices are heard. The postmodern feminism has bought a progressive line in terms of female discourse. The character of Sujata is framed in the pattern of subaltern female study that leads to different modes for study by looking at binary positions of male or female. The noteworthy distinction is that Mahasweta Devi systematically separated the whole span of twenty-four hours into four-time frames viz., 'dawn', 'afternoon', 'evening' and 'night', one following the other. Ostensibly, it may even be seen as a linear narrative that has been so intended as to project the numerous facets of oppressions Sujata is constrained to suffer in the Chatterjee family circle. But a closer illumination put on view how the linearity is continually ruptured and disrupted through a chain of reminiscence snapshots and flashbacks, which not only help Sujata in reclaiming her personal memory but also provide her the much-needed psychic healing.

The other play Aajir is a record of exploitation and ill-treatment, and the play documents and

highlights the decadent social aspects and their outcomes for the general community who are not educated and living in rural communities. Mahasweta Devi obviously moves from the urban world to the provincial world where the cruelty of the blameless is executed on a bigger scale. It is profoundly ironical that even after over seventy years of autonomy; social shades of malice like bonded labour still prevail in India.

Aajir is fundamentally a social play in which Mahasweta Devi attempts to give innovative expression to the sufferings of the under-privileged in their experience with the serious exploitative framework. It is the record of a slave, Paatan whose forebears signed a bond of slavery. It shows a sensible picture of the provincial India where the brutal strategy of slavery has been grinding away for ages. Varnas (castes) of Shudra's were denied any benefit to property, teaching and choice of occupation and their total dependence on other caste Hindus reduced their status to that of slaves.

The play Bayen deals with a mother's status in society being restored by her son when she dies in a rail accident. The central character Chandidasi being labelled as Bayen is forbidden to talk to her son Bhagirath who was told by his father that his mother died when he was an infant. But when Bhagirath comes to know about the

Relationship between him and the Bayen, his naive mind is full of compassion for his abandoned mother. Though he is forbidden to talk to her, he talks to her through the reflection. He is not afraid of her though there are superstitions associated with the Bayen. How could a child be afraid of his own mother? When Malindar, Chandidasi's husband, does not listen to her woes, Bhagirath sneaks out of his house in the middle of night and listens to his mother crying. Aajir has realistically portrayed the turbulence and turmoil in the heart of a bonded slave who is held so for being a descendant of a family of slaves. Aajir further depicts how the ignorant, illiterate rustics on account of poverty fall prey to exploitation and lead a life of eternal servitude. The story has been adapted into a powerful play by Mahasweta Devi herself. Before the play starts, a voice repeats thrice: 'The term aajir stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum.' The sheer repetition of this line immediately captures the attention of the audience. The entire focus of the play is on the social evil of bonded labour and the predicament of that section of humanity, which is subjected to inhuman exploitation and brutal treatment on account of poverty.

The plays depict the agony of mothers who are marginalized by the society. Both of them are

traditional Indian women who do not question the authority of men in the society. They can't rebel against the unjust society and if at all they try to protest they cannot stick to their revolt. Chandidasi accepts the label of Bayen and lives an isolated life. The only difference between Sujata and Chandidasi is that Sujata is a literate urban woman while the latter is a poor and an illiterate villager. Though Sujata is aware of her husband's extramarital affair and the family members' contempt for Brati, she cannot slam the door on her husband's face and leave the house. Both the women lack the guts of Ibsen's Nora who reminds her husband about her sacred duty to herself. She refuses to become a doll in the hands of Helmed and bids farewell to his doll's house.

But Sujata and Chandidasi become silent sufferers and witnesses to the injustice done to them. Interestingly, it is death that reunites the mothers with their children and permanently asserts authenticity to their lives.

Mother of 1084 ends with Sujata's breaking down at Tuli's engagement party, fervently urging the audience not to be silent sufferers but respond actively to social reality. Her exhortation to the audience bears semblance to the Knight's apologia in *Murder in the Cathedral*. She collapses at the end and dies as her appendix bursts. The play *Bayen* ends with the death of Bayen, regenerating the identity of Chandidasi as a mother. When Chandidasi is on her way to meet Malindar to complain to him about Bhagirath's sneaking out of the house at night, she bravely stops the train from meeting with an accident and averts a major catastrophe. But in doing so, she loses her life as the train swallows her. The guard of the train acknowledges her as an embodiment of courage and advocates a cash reward for her. As soon as the villagers learn about the cash reward, they re-establish Bayen's identity as a "Dome woman". But it is Bhagirath, the dead Chandidasi's son, who steps out of the crowd and gives her a true identity as his mother.

Urvashi O Johnny, Mahasweta Devi provides the audience with an opportunity for the first time to watch how Johnny, the champion of the suffering brethren, is left with none, and how he is converted into a non-entity. He loses his voice which he uses to offer people, at least, a moment of release from the hardships and struggles of the world. However serious the consequences may be, Johnny does not give up his vocation. He finds in it a form of freedom--a freedom of finding his joy and love in others. Johnny is an orphan. Unlike many of those orphans who lead a worse than marginal existence in the slums and on the pavements of major cities like Calcutta, Johnny struggles to live the life of an upright human

being. His search for a happier life leads him to the career of ventriloquism. Initially, it serves as a means for him to earn a living, but bit by bit it becomes an obsession with him. He finds in it a proper outlet for his feelings.

Water may be read as the historically elegiac tale of the despair of the rural peasantry which is perpetual. As a documentary on the dynamics of rural poverty, the narrative shows that the village government, the water supply, drought relief, education, health and other public institutions of development like the gram panchayat are consistently distorted to ensure that caste and class dominance is preserved. The task of allocating of public funds for education or health facilities is delegated to the official representatives or to the gram panchayat. Ironically, the funding rules ensure that the poorest benefit the least. Those who would demand justice or dare question the misappropriation of the funds are met with intimidation or brutal violence or labelled as Naxals and reported to the police. Santosh, the village head who is also the local bigwig landowner and moneylender owns a distillery that caters to the poor reminding us of the typical attitude of the feudal lords.

Santosh superficially acts as a spokesperson of the backward, dalit, rural farming community. He and his cohorts, the local officials claim the 'privileges of sight, including those of insight, foresight and even hindsight'. Empowered by the system of representation, Santosh claims to speak on behalf of others and also claims to have the knowledge and the solution to the problems the villagers face. Maghai is a low caste Dome, a meek, persecuted, landless peasant. Phulmani, a spirited, nurturing and courageous peasant wife, is also a woman whose smoldering private gaze and acerbic retorts communicate hurt and suffering, Dhura, their son reacts with anger against injustice meted out to their brethren and like his mother conveys a unique helplessness through his strident speech and sharp gestures. Jiten Maiti, the Gandhian who teaches the children of the weaker sections is inadequate in his effort in bringing them out of subjugation. Mahasweta Devi brings out successfully the predicament of the herculean stature of a man struggling against the exploitatative feudal system as well as against environment.

Mahasweta Devi had played a crucial role in setting up a new paradigm in Indian literature, by giving it connectivity with larger political and social concerns. The thematic preoccupations throughout her literary career authenticate her active engagement with the issues of the marginalized communities in the country. She wrote many stories and articles forcefully articulating her indictment against the hegemonic

forces persecuting the underdogs. Almost all her writings, both creative and activist, barring a few exceptions, are centered on the lives of the underprivileged sections of Indian society, particularly the tribals and Dalits. Her works, besides providing a platform for resistance, debunk the mechanics of power in contemporary society which seeks to subordinate the subaltern in all spheres of life. She demonstrates that power and authority can be disrupted through resistance. This is the strong reason why she allowed her characters to address the audience directly while exploring the sufferings of subaltern communities that are socially, politically and economically oppressed.

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