

Living on the Edge: Women in the Writings of Mahasweta Devi

Abstract

Women writers have proved that their writings are serious and require attention. They handle things efficiently balancing tradition and womanhood. They are able to create a specific feminine mode of writing, fighting for the liberation of womenfolk in subjugation and all those forces within and outside the society that troubled the neat categories of the family and mutilated the feminine side of a woman. Mahasweta Devi has been successful in representing the plights or ordeals of the women by pointing out the weakness of modern Indian society and criticizing it for the exploitation of the poor. Through her stories an attempt has been made to explore that how a woman takes recourse to the use of her body as it is the only available, revenue she has for resistance. The paper discusses about some of her short stories such as, "Breast-Giver", "Draupadi", "Dhoul", "Shanichari", "Chinta", "Giribala", and "Fairytale of Rajbhasa" in order to explain the paradoxical position and representation of women in society as well as their fragmented voices. The women in these stories depict the plight of sufferers who demands their individual position in society and raise their voice against gender inequality. They denied a subject position and are subalterns.

Keywords: Subaltern, Oppressed, Women, Struggle, Resistance, Exploitation, Marginalized.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is an eminent Indian Bengali writer, has not only worked for the women, but as a socialist also served various tribal people and other minor communities of both India and Bengal. This is the reason she has very close observation about the problem of these people and which she portrayed in her stories. Her stories speak of this unspeakable truth of women's misery and their power of enduring and resistance. In her stories, readers get the linear story which is derelict in mainstream literature. Her fiction offers an array of female's position in society as well as their materialistic use of the body for the social and economic purpose. (Nowshin,1) Mahasweta Devi not only brings to the fore the marginalization of women, but also depicts their resistance and protest against the oppressive social set-up. The violence inflicted on the lower class and tribal women becomes a site for Mahasweta Devi's study as she rewrites the outcasts and the marginalized classes into history. She has also very deeply scrutinized the position of women in our society, gender bias and social tyranny meted out to the marginalized or subaltern sections of society.

Aim of the Study

Devi's women characters are subjected to endless social and political oppression, which they resist powerfully. Beck and Bose aptly put it in their article, Voicing and articulating the muted and the silenced, representing the gender margins within that of caste, the cause of the gendered subaltern, empowerment and radical feminist realism, and an attempt for subaltern speaking have been attributed to her fictional texts (1995, 441). Mahasweta Devi's stories are stark truths of life, which society tries to slip under the garb of acceptability. Her women characters are never idealized perfections. They represent the core of the marginalized strata of society. In the words of Saumitra Chakravarty:

They are black, barbaric, and beautiful- monolithic, with the primeval purity of the black stone and red soil they spring from. These women symbolize power . . . from the drab gruelling poverty of village life, Mahasweta Devi's women emerge as sources of simple strength and indomitable rural courage to their men." (16).



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Her stories “*Shanichari*, *Dhouli*, and the *Fairy tale of Rajbhasa* deal with the practice dreaded trade in which women are used and abused by the contractors, the brick kiln owners and intermediaries who scout the poverty ridden villages to entrap these poor unsuspecting girls. Illegal deforestation has handicapped them at a fundamental level by taking away an important source of sustenance. Also, displacement from the agricultural land has rendered them destitute. The Stories lays open the gendered cases underneath the socio-political and economic exploitation of the women belonging to the backward minority.

Review of Literature

Related literature has been reviewed for the purpose of writing the paper. Mahasweta chronicled the injustices against the marginalized in her novels translated by Spivak. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the leading post-colonial critic projects deconstruction of history. Shashi Tharu and K.Lalita in her book ‘Women Writing in India’ meticulously researched, presented and re-presented the marginalized voices. G. Sripatha “Marginalization in the Mahaseta Devi’s Short Story”, focuses on the undocumented history of the oppressed and presents how the hegemonic factor creates and maintains political system. Audity Nowshin in her thesis “Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: a Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Short Stories” Mahasweta Devi’s stories speak of this unspeakable truth of women’s misery and their power of enduring and resistance. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures, generating aesthetics of opposition in the process. Huma Yaqub in her article “Performing Resistance and Reconstructing Margins in Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*” speaks about her championing the cause of tribals in India she is particularly devoted to ensure their economic, political and social security. She is very vocal about the fact that the tribals are being pushed out of the forests; their natural habitat and source of livelihood. Denied of their contribution in history and perceived as savage they are left out of the progress which India is making. Jaswant Rathod in his article “Positioning The Subaltern in Post-Colonial India: A Socio-Cultural and Environmental Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *Pterodactyl*” shows that her polemical writing is fuelled by her crusading activism and her sincere attempts to improve the condition of the marginalized class of India.

Voice of the Voiceless

Mahasweta Devi brings to the fore the pitiable condition of women who on account of abject poverty are compelled to move out of the confines of their home and step in the public realm which leads them to face the worst kind of exploitations. There they are not only forced to render unpaid services, but are also subject to sexual harassment. In the *Fairy Tale of Rajabasha* Joshmina is raped by various *Maliks*. Mahasweta Devi gives a touching account of the brutal treatment Joshmina receives at the hands of her *malik*, Niranjan who repeatedly rapes her. She is almost dehumanized. She is made to work incessantly and compelled to surrender her body to

him every afternoon. The writer shows her treatment in these lines "This is how she turned into a robot controlled by Niranjan." His cruelty knows no limits. He rapes her as her baby watches in fear--"Niranjan Singh came the next day and the next. Gradually Joshmina turned into a ghost-ridden presence"(70)

In story ‘Dhouli’ the protagonist, a young widow is seduced and impregnated by the son of a wealthy Brahmin named Misrilal. He gets rid of the responsibility by marrying another woman and settled in Ranchi. When Dhouli, finds no way to earn her livelihood, she begins to sell her body. When Misrilal returns, he forces her to leave the village and move to the city to become a prostitute. Misrilal father-Hanumanji announced:

“Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burned to death” (31).

After the village Panchayat pronounces judgment on her, she has to leave the village. It is ironical that Misrilal who once courted Dhouli for her beauty joins hands with wicked men, masquerading as respectable members of society and ostracizes her in order to preserve the moral order. It is significant to note that even the tribal untouchables, do not make any protest against this verdict. The narrative thus overtly points to direct repression, which is the product of a societal power structure interlinked with the hegemony of a dominant class. An exposure of the outcome of the exploitation of power- the acceptance of the verdict of Hanumanji even by the marginalized- is shown to be the consequence of the created culture of the privileged, which results in the desertion by the marginalized of even one belonging to their own community.

The story of “Shanichari” conveys the same suffering. She becomes a brick lane worker where she is both sexually and economically exploited. She has driven out of her village purposefully and then forced to work in brick lane. Then, she is used as low paid worker where she has to work all most whole day and at night she becomes a sexual product. *Shanichari* is owned by the *malik* Rahmat and is used by him to satisfy his sexual urges. “She is 109 decked up like a doll by him and then tormented, mutilated till his sexual appetite is satisfied. Even other labourer girls are not spared. During ‘holi’ these poor girls are raped by *malik*’s friends. They forcibly make the girls have liquor and when they are drunk, strip them and appease their carnality. This final marginalization of *Shanichari*—her marginalization by the marginal— is neatly presented through a dialogue between the brother of her murdered lover, Chand Tirkey, and the *naiga*, the village head-priest: “We should think about this as a community. There could be more *Shanicharis* in the future. Should we cast out our own women? Will that benefit our society?” The *naiga* said, “We’ll think about it if it happens again. Not now. This is a new problem” (54).” In Chattopadhyay’ words, the plight of these women who usually have no one to turn to, nothing to look forward to, and have only a

few to lend them a voice--- women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and within their own communities (105).

In story "Draupadi", there is an oppressed woman speaks loudly, literally and metaphorically, for her voice is as 'terrifying', sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation and makes herself heard. Dopdi, in her story "Draupadi" is a revised and demythicized incarnation of the epical Draupadi, who belongs to the Santhal tribe. She is apprehended, tortured gang raped, brutalized all through the night neither expects nor receives salvation from any quarter. She would not wash, nor allow the rapists to clothe her the morning after. By disallowing her torture, rape and nakedness to intimidate her and instead of using these as weapons to insult and browbeat the enemy, Dopdi inverts the whole system of significations the epic is promised upon. Devi's episode assigns to sexual assault and nakedness i.e. shame, loss, feat only serves to consolidate the operating relations of power. She asks the Senanayak:

" Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, 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? Come on, counter me, come on, counter me-?" (402)

Mahasweta's Dopdi ironically reverses the semiotics of these signs to produce a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension, and scare among the male-violators. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, throughout Mahasweta Devi's varied fiction, have opined that: "Women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of caste and class. But in the best of her writing the quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situations she depicts(235)."

One of her stories 'Giribala' is an example of the sufferings and issues that an Indian girl encountered after her arrange marriage. The story reflects the financial problems and the problems of class differences where a poor girl married for money. This Story also reflects the general behavior of people and the attitudes of man towards the woman the criteria for likeness and dislikes and reflects the behavior of men in this society, and considering their wives as a useless house keeper.

In 'Stanadayini or or Breast Giver', Devi outlines the woman's identity as a body, worker and object. In a tale of the Bengali wet nurse, she shows female protagonist Jashoda living in 1960's India as she is compelled to take up 'professional motherhood' with her only ability held in her always full breasts and her desperate economic destitution. She has swiftly utilized and praised for her expert weaning and wealthy offspring, which she does for twenty five years, before losing her usefulness and consequently dying from breast cancer. Jashoda is a metaphor used to describe decolonized India as being mother by hire. "Breast-Giver" depicts the ingratitude of children to their mother who have devoted her entire life to them in the hope being rewarded with filial

affection. From a modern feminist perspective, they appear as repressed women, living according to male dominated system. The women have to obey the tradition and can't articulate about their individual needs and desires.

Undoubtedly, She has attempted to reveal the voice and ordeals of woman and exact mirror of the society by the creation of her stories. "Rudaali" is a multi-layered story in which issue of caste, class, gender and economics etc are portrayed and the woman characters Sanichari and Bikhini stands against all odds. Another story "Sikaar or The Hunt" depicts the courageous action of protagonist Mary Oraon, who avenges her oppressor Tehsildar in hunting festival. Her story 'Bayen' is a commentary upon the socioeconomic structures where a woman named "Chandi" becomes a victim of societal superstition and sacrificed her life for the sake of community. In another story, "Douloti the Bountiful" the protagonist Doulati is sold into bonded prostitution where she contracts a venereal disease and dies on her way to hospital. Her corpse questions the authority of patriarchal states. Amartya Sen says: "An adequate realization of women's agency relates not only to the freedom to question and reassess. Critical agency is a great ally of development.(273)" All the women characters are the embodiment of silent unsung heroism. Necessity compels them to shed the inhibitions and come out of the confines of their home to fight poverty and the exploiters. They all epitomize rural courage, waging a relentless fight against deprivation, dispossession and oppression.

Conclusion

The stories explore the woman in her role as wife, mother, breadwinners, an individual, and as a protector. These stories have underlying commonalities in the struggle of the women in these different roles and faced struggle to be manifested in different ways. The women in these stories depict the plight of sufferers who demands their individual position in society and raise their voice against gender inequality. They denied a subject position and are subalterns. She strongly advocates the need for change in attitude towards women and questions the hegemony of patriarchy. Her women characters, come out of their stupor, break their long-time silence and fight against unfair divisions to define their dignity. She not only projects them as individuals in their own right, but also expressly portrays the ideal of female empowerment.

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