

Mahasweta Devi and Her Native World of Subalterns: A Critical Study

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Abstract

For Mahasweta Devi, Subalternism means the suffering people, whether male or female, who are unable to resist the atrocities, perpetrated upon them by the high-class, privileged people. Her concept of subalternism is based upon the unjust sufferings and deprivations of the tribal people of West Bengal whom she has observed and experienced with close quarters. Devi's creative art on the down-trodden tribals represents the realization of their silenced voice, since the suffering sections are never allowed to raise their voice for justice. The observations of Devi, regarding the silent sufferings of the tribals or subalterns, are similar to Bell Hooks who also calls the subalterns, whether at their native place or in foreign land, as the Marginalized people. Both Bell Hooks and Mahasweta Devi assert that the high-class Privileged people, associated with the colonizers or the state authorities, pretend to be the well-wishers of the marginalized people in favour of their self-defence or self-glorification. The present research paper depicts Devi's clarion call for justice as the liberated voice of the subalterns.

Keywords

Subalternism, Marginalized People, The Colonizers, Self-Glorification, Clarion Call.

Introduction

Devi has perpetuated the legacy of the cultural Renaissance of the Bengal social-reformers, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bhabani Bhattacharya and other intellectual humanists because she has also tried to realized to the Utopian society, based on socio political equality and justice for all, which had been envisioned by her predecessors. When the socialist-Marxist movement was carried on by the Soviet leaders for the betterment of the proletariat, the Italian Marxist-critic, Antonio Gramsci had added a new meaning to the word, 'Subaltern'. For him, subalterns were the hopeless, voiceless exploited lot of the working class in the prosperous world of the dominant capitalist. Later, this word became very much popular with the observation of Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty in the post-colonial world of cultural criticism. Devi has written her stories and novels on the plight of the exploited tribals and other sections of under privileged people which drew the attention of such a post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty. She has translated much of Devi's fictional creation with her own insightful critical comments. Spivak is given the credit for putting the regional world of Devi's subalternism from the local to the global level.

Objective of study

The present research paper tends to reveal the suppressed voice of the subaltern the Devi wants to raise through her revolutionary writing.

Review of Literature

Mahasweta Devi was born in a highly scholarly family of Bengal because her parents and grand parents used to devote themselves to intellectual pursuits by reading philosophical or historical books and writing poetry and essays. Devi had been a precocious child who learnt much from the books of History and human culture as well as from her visits and experiences to various cities of West Bengal. During the Famine of 1943, she worked actively as a volunteer to the relief and rehabilitation of the famine-stricken people of Bengal. She did her graduation with Hons. in English from Shantiniketan itself, and just after marriage, she completed her postgraduation in English from Calcutta University. Because of the academic ambience of her family, Devi started writing stories right from her early days, and gradually developed it not only as a means of free expression but also as a means of livelihood. She worked as a private tutor, as a clerk in the Government post-office, as a sales woman, selling soaps door to door to overcome the financial hardships of her family, since her communist-leftist husband, Visan Bhattacharya was unable to secure a permanent job. Devi herself was very much impressed with the socialist ideas of great Russian writers like Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekhov, Mayakovsky and others, but she did never join the communist party. While staying at Bombay with her husband, she got the opportunity to read the life-history of V. D. Sawarkar, 1857, which encouraged her to explore the revolutionary real of the great warriors of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. Devi didn't rely upon the books of history for writing about the Rani of Jhansi; she travelled Bundel khand extensively for collecting historical facts folklore and other datas for writing her historical book of reality. Despite the financial constraints, she started writing *Jhansi Rani* which had been published serially in the Bengali Magazine, 'Desh'. The publishing company, New Age, gave Rs 500/- to Mahasweta Devi for publishing her serials into a book on the *Rani Of Jhansi*. Thus, her first book came out in 1956.

Main Text

In 1964, Mahasweta Devi joined Vijaygadh Jyotish Rai college as a teacher and continued the profession of teaching till 1984 when she had opted for voluntary retirement in pursuit of her writing career. As a social-activist and spokes person of the marginalized and oppressed section, she travelled the tribal areas in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Gujarat. In fact, she spent her life among the tribals of Palamu in Jharkhand for quite some time to realize their hardships of life, caused by the insensitive exploitation of the upper-caste landlords and the indifferent attitude of the Bengal government. Mahasweta Devi dedicated herself whole-heartedly to uplift the condition of the tribal communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. Being a native of West Bengal, Devi also explored the problems of Naxalite movement, and tried to write about their social and human rights. The tribal problem and the problem of Naxalwari had the same problem of their identity-crisis and their native right on their soil which seemed to be usurped by the Capitalist forces. Mahasweta Devi wrote so much in support of the identity, dignity and human rights of the Sabar tribe that she had been nick named with honour, 'The Mother of the Sabars'. As a creative writer, she looks upon art or literature as an instrument for the empowerment of the oppressed and marginalized section. She justifies her creative work, based on practical realities of life; 'I think a creative writer should have a social consciousness. I have a duty towards society'. (1) She wrote her novel, *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) to glorify the life-history of the first tribal revolutionary, Birsa Munda who opposed fiercely the conversion of the tribals into Christians by the Britishers in the Pre-independence days. Birsa Munda also raised his voice against the unjust and arbitrary confiscation of the large tracts of fertile agricultural land and forest from the tribal area in the name of development policy of the Government. Besides their undue sufferings, the tribals groups were notified as 'Criminals' by the British in 1871 which put a stigma on their simple, agricultural existence. Mahasweta Devi received Sahitya Akadmi Award in 1979 for her book on Birsa Munda, *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Rights to the Forest) which made the Munda tribal community jubilant and they sang on drums – 'we won the Sahitya Akademi'. They invited Mahasweta Devi to Medinipur to felicitate her literary achievement and honour as their own honour. They declared that their community must be registered in official document as Munda Tribes of India, because their identity, history and culture have been connected by Devi in the mainstream of Indian history. Mahasweta Devi decided to explore the culture and plight of the tribes as much as possible so that their mindless exploitation by the high cast landlords and government officials must be checked. Credit goes to the social activism of Mahasweta Devi that in 2016, the Jharkhand state Government removed the menacles from the commemorative statue of Birsa Munda, as young revolutionary tribal leader, which was based on the photograph taken from the period of British rule.

Mahasweta's commitment to the uplift of the tribals moved forward in her second book of tribes in 1980, *Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir* which was later translated into English by Spivak in 2002. This book has been appreciated as a book of tribal consciousness since they became conscious to retain their indigenous identity and their culture of archery. As Devi herself comments: 'What Chotti Munda or my other stories and books depict in a continuing struggle' (2). She depicts not only the tribals's resistance against the tyrannical exploitation of the landlords, capitalists and the contractors who treated them as bonded labour but also their survival strategy to uphold their community. The main problem of the Mundas that we get in this novel is their uprooted position because they don't have any right on their land or forest as well as its precious minerals and yielding. Putri Munda recalls the tribal plight – 'how white men and Biharis jumped at the right of the coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured adivasi areas with slums of title-rooted dwellings. Who knows what such people will do if they see gold? These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled'. (3). These Tribals were more interested in planting Sagun tree than Sal tree because the latter specie is ecologically worthy. When Chotti Munda comes to the village of Dhani Munda to learn the art of archery, he realizes the manipulative facilities, which are given to the Mundas by the Britishers and his associates, to be fool and uproot them like cattle for setting up new industries and projects. Thus, the old fendal system on the tribal areas gets gradually replaced with the modern capitalism. At this point, we may optly cite the statement of Ranjit Guha : '..... that subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance, for 'Subaltern groups' are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (4). Chotti Munda gets shocked to see the helpless rage of Dhani Munda for the safety of the Munda Community. Dhani informs Chotti of the disgraceful story of the kherwar revolt, the Mulko revolt of the sardars and then Birsa's revolt which concluded in futility. Chotti Munda learnt Archery with arrow which became the symbol of fearless resistance. Dhani asks Chotti to regain their native land and forest with the help of his arrow because the landlords are interested only in growing rice which can be harvested not from all land. These tribes know how to produce pepper from these land, but they are not interested in growing pepper because the landlord will take away all the yielding of pepper. When Famine struck the village, the dominant land owners Lala Bajinath and his son, Tirathnath got the hungry tribals or bonded labours beaten by the police. Chotti Munda gathered all Munda with bows and arrows and usurped the granaries of Tirathnath. The Psychological trauma of the bond-slave makes Dhukhiya so desperate that he hangs himself to death : 'It's as if Dukhiya is drunk, drunk, as if he's free at last from the bond – slavery of his soul's thousand sorrows. His legs tremble a bit, he gives an innocent glance that holds a world wide astonishment, and he says, Ye said he wouldn't badmouth no more'. (5). Dukhiya has to undergo the unjust sufferings of bond-slavery from the earlier generations

and only death can conclude it. Another Munda, Puran Kills Tasildar Singh with his poisonous arrow because the latter smashed the former's house with his elephant. Devi shows the harmonious bonding between Nature and the Munda tribe because Dhani calls Nature our Mother and encourages Chotti with these words : 'Let me learn yet' jungle. With Jungle learning ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in the jogle (6). Mahasweta Devi glorifies the art of Tribal settlement who used to explore the dense forest and its soil, and then they start their settlement as per the quality of wind, soil and water. The pattern of settlement by the Mundas is pollution free and healthy, because they populate the soil and the forest without violating its spirit. Dhani says that the Jungle and land urge them to make free from Diku-Master-White man. At the end of the novel, Devi celebrates the Munda Archery festival in which Chotti comes out victorious, and handing over his magical arrow to his son, he urges his son to continue tribal resistance against unjust oppression so that the legacy of great Mundas would not go waste. Mahasweta Devi's other stories like *Titu Mir Bharsa* and *Basai Tudar* deal with the problems of Tribals and their genuine demands for dignified survival.

Being a female writer, it was expected from Mahasweta Devi that she would write mostly about the suffering of women from the male-dominated society and that she would champion the cause of women's emancipation and the emergence of a new woman, breaking away the age-old established norms of Patriarchy. Mahasweta Devi wrote much about the silent suffering of women, but she didn't like to be labeled as a feminist. According to Devi, she used to write about the oppressed class or persons, and it didn't matter to her whether the oppressed person was male or female. In one of her interviews, she speaks frankly : I am a woman, and I am writing. But I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing, most of my books, it is about class exploitation, the underclass is exploited, men, women together. Of course, women get worst part of it, but not always. Definitely, I am interested in women's positions, women's thoughts. But I am more interested in active work' (7). Devi's first novel was *Jhansi Rani* in which she celebrates the Rani of Jhansi as the central figure of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. She has been depicted not as a fighter against the rigid Patriarchal system, but against the oppressive colonial power. There is no doubt that the poor, downtrodden and untouchables are subalterns and their voice for justice remains stifled in the society because they lack both commercial and political power. The women, belonging to the poor and downtrodden section, appear to be the victims of double- subalternism because they have been oppressed both inside and outside their community. The story of Rudali, which was later translated by Arjun Katyal in 1977, narrates the miserable life of two widows, Sanichari and Bikhni who survive themselves by working as professional mourners at the funeral of the richmen, priests and landed gentry. These rudalis used to weep ruefully in black dress with their dishelled hair as a matter of honour to the deceased person. Sanichari was living in object penury, and gradually she was left all alone by the death of Ganju, her husband and by the disappearance of her son, Budhua. Sanichari got so much saturated with heart-breaking grief and tormenting loneliness that she lost her faculty of wailing and crying. With the arrival of Bikhni in her life, Sanichari got a little hope and interested, but while performing as a Rudali at landlord Ram Avtar's death, she got the news that Bikhni was also no more. Sanichari's superficial role of a mourner became the real one because she was completely overtaken with grief and shock of Bikhni. This story of Rudali was later adapted in film which became a tremendous success. Through this story, Mahasweta Devi lashes at not only the superficial rituals of the high society but also the exploitation of the poor, miserable women by the rich who forced them to do this morbid work for their livelihood.

The miseries and exploitation of the poor and underprivileged women are portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in such of her books, *Bayen*, *Titu Mir* and *The Breast Stories*. In *Bayen*, we get the story of a gravedigger, dalit women, Chandidasi who is married to Malindar. Chandidasi has inherited this odious job of digging grave for the burial of the dead children from her father who had been a guard to the graves. Chandidasi did never like this profession, but her object penury forced her to do this job. When she became the mother of a son, Bhagirath, she started hating this job and urged Malindar to take her and her son away from this tormenting job. Her husband was an employee at Morgue. Once while suckling her son, she had to go the graves of the children to guard them from the hungry jackals. Some of the hypocritical Hindus started calling her a Bayen (a witch who feeds the dead children to curse others) because she was returning from the graves with milk, oozing from her breasts. The superstitious and callous villagers ill-treated her as a Bayen ; she had not been allowed to see her own son. Despite her justification, nobody heard her pleadings. We may quote the words of Patricia Waugh to expose the agony of Chandidasi ; 'If women speak outside the symbolic order they will either not be heard or be heard insame' (8) Chandidasi started living on the charity of the people and her husband, but one day she foiled a rail accident by her alertness of mind for which she was supposed to be awarded by the railway authorities. At that moment, her misguided son, Bhagirath came forward to restore her human identity by calling her mother. Mahasweta Devi expose the illiterate mind of the rural people who can turn a human figure into a horrible one. She wants to say that every woman, whether poor or rich, dalit or elite, has the milk of human kindness in her heart. She further says that there is no Bayen in female body ; instead, Byron Lies in the mind of the people which must be removed with positive attitude. In *Titu Mir* , Mahasweta Devi highlights the spiritual strength and devotion of the wife of *Titu Mir*, Maimuna who remains neglected throughout her married life. *Titu Mir* has been a committed peasant leader of 1830-31, and was killed in his struggle against landlords and Britishers. After spending three years in jail for the

riot, Titu returns to his house, but he doesn't seem to be so much concerned with the plight and negligence of his wife. His wife puts on bangles to attract and welcome her revolutionary husband, but Titu is supposed to leave her once again for Mecca to meet a Muslim leader. She replies in her humble tone, 'Have I ever said no to anything you've wanted to do? Have I ever stood in your way?' (9). In the freedom struggle of Bengali Peasant, the self sacrifice was done as much from the side of the Patriarchy as from the female kind. History always exaggerates the exploits of the male persons, subducing the female sacrifice which is the real strength behind male heroism.

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* was originally written in Bengali which was later translated by Spivak into English in 1997. The title contains the exclusive female organ 'Breast' because it stands for commodification and commercialization of female body. In this trilogy, the first story is 'Draupadi' in which the female protagonist is Dopdi Mejher. She has been a tribal revolutionary, helping the fugitives or naxalites to resist the oppressive measures of both the upper-caste Landlords and the British Police. Unfortunately, her husband, Dulna, died in the Police encounter, leaving behind the message for his wife to continue helping tribal fugitives. Dopdi Mejher has been locked in police custody where her female body is raped and tortured repeatedly to break her militant zeal. She finds herself in a semi-nude, semi-conscious condition in the morning. When she is summoned by the British Senanayak to interrogate, she strips herself completely, refusing to wear a single shred of clothes on her sexually-exploited body. Dopdi throws a challenge to the rude Patriarchy who can strip a woman for their sexual last, but they can't face a naked female body to display their decency. That's why, the Masculinity of Senanayak and his accomplices is defeated with the bold naked body of Dopdi; 'what's the use of cloths? 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?' (10) The irony of situation lies in the fact that Dopdi emerged as the most powerful subject before the colonial power or its fully clothed officer. The myth of helpless Draupadi, the central female character in the epic, *Mahabharata* is exploded because Dopdi Mejher appears to be stronger, both physically and spiritually, than her counterpart from the great epic. The second story is related to the commoditization of the breast since it has been used to suckle or feed the Halder's children in return of money and privileges. Jasoda, a Brahmin wetnurse, continues to bear seventeen children so that she may be able to provide her milk to Halder's children, very much like 'the mother cow'. Her handicapped husband forces her to continue her profession, but soon Jasoda is detected to be a patient of breast cancer. Even though she has reared fifty children with her milk, yet no child comes to solace her. She meets a neglected death. 'The Breast giver' reflects the trauma of a trapped female body whose value and dignity lies only in its utility. The last story of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Story* is 'Behind the Bodice' which is based on a seductive, sensual song of the popular Hindi film, 'Khalnayak'. In the beginning of the story, Mahasweta Devi argues that when the whole nation is riddled with a number of socio-political issues, various crimes prevalent in society, at that time who has interest to find out 'what lies behind the bodice'. The story moves round the tragedy related to the heavy breasts of a migrant labour named Gangor. Upin, an urban photographer interested in taking unique snaps of rural people and areas, takes a snap of Gangor at random, exposing her breast to the National Press. Gangor becomes an object of sexual abuse and exploitation not only by her own community but also by the police. She has been branded as a prostitute for displaying her breasts for money. In the lock-up, Gangor's breasts have to undergo the torture of Police's brutality. Gangor didn't get the justice even in the male-dominated society which provoked tribal woman activists to tear off blouses on the court premises as a mark of their protest against Police brutality on female body. The mangled, bitten breast of Gangor exposes the harsh reality of the poor, dalit women who can be easily victimized by the phallocentric society. Devi justifies her creative writings on the burning social issues of life: 'The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of exploiting agencies..... My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthless unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting System. (11).

Conclusion

Devi's style of writing is also a challenge to the Masculine prose-style because she expresses the bold, daring feminine sensibility in her short, clipped, punctuated and fragmented sentences, without any emotional shock and sentimentalism. We do not get a lot of sloppishness and sensuousness on the part of her female characters, having the mythical names in the under privileged Third-World scenario. There are ample proofs in the tribal history to reveal the brutal, ruthless attitude of the colonizers or the state authorities which suppressed the tribal's basic demand for the dignified survival. Devi looks upon the tussle between the tribals and the state authorities in the Post-colonial India as the tussle between the tribals and the state authorities in the Post-colonial India as the tussle between ecological ambience and technological development. Devi seems to be very much impressed with the special; ecological knowledge and awareness of the Munda tribe, and naturally she calls this very ethnic faculty of the Mundas as "ethnology". Devi doesn't approve the label of 'feminine' or feminist regarding her writings and her identity because she has suspicions against the fixed, elite feminist theories which are practiced only for the benefit of the high-class, white ladies. Devi's revolutionary mind rejects the stereotyped roles of the dictates of hallow patriarchy. Devi's most important contribution to the study of the subalternism, as existed in her native land in India, lies in her fictional tales of the struggling tribals and in her re-writing of the mythic characters, who surrendered themselves sheepishly to exploitative coils of the orthodox patriarchy. Devi has discussed all the aspects of a female identity, her

various roles at various stage of life and also the conflicting moments when a female has to choose one individual identity between the two. Similarly, in her celebrated book on the Munda tribe, Devi has given the Mundas their own native and indigenous identity with the glorification of their art of archery. Chotti Munda's challenge to the state authorities becomes a new liberated voice of the age-long suppressed voice of the vagabond tribals. The prose style and narrative structure of Devi's novel and stories are highly argumentative with practical solutions for the rehabilitation of the displaced, starving subalterns. Spivak did a commendable job by translating Devi's revolutionary fictional art of subalternism which would also encourage the Western Critics to explore the silent world of subalternism. Her commitment to the uplift of the subalterns has been highly praised and acknowledge by the conscious people through such awards – Jnanpith Award, Padmashri Award, Padma Vibhushan and Roman Magsaysay Award.

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