

Political Significance of the Documentation of Mahasweta Devi's Treatment of the Marginalized

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Abstract. Mahasweta Devi was a well-known personality in modern contemporary Bengali literature. Her works uplift to the tribal community is commendable. Her writings also targeted the subordinate status of women in India. The present paper aims to document political significance of how Mahasweta Devi treated the marginalized. It will be dealing with histories of the marginalized that includes tribals, women as well as Dalits and will show how Mahasweta Devi's texts acted as a voice of protest against the corrupt political system. Mahasweta Devi wrote in her regional language, Bangla. The famous literary theorist and feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made her known to the world of literature by translating some of the notable works from Bangla into English. The Bengali writer was once the voice of the oppressed. Her works reflected reality that was frequently ignored by the nation. A reality for which there was no room.

Keywords : Oppression; protest; tribals; marginalized; caste; corruption.

Mahasweta Devi was a prolific Bengali author who wrote for the tribals and underprivileged. She wrote in her regional language, Bangla. Her writings showed the pitiful condition of India's marginalized people in which women were also included. She made important contributions in the field of literature for which she received various prestigious awards like Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnapith Award, Sharat Chandra Memorial Award, Padma Shri, Ramon Magsaysay Award and many more. She often depicted the savage oppression of tribal people, dalit and women by the upper-caste people and also by the government in her Bengali fiction. Since, she wrote in Bangla, her impressive works could not reach to the other parts of India. The famous feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made Mahasweta Devi known to the world of literature by translating some her notable works from Bangla into English. And then many translators came forward to translate her works into English. Her texts had also been translated into Kannada. She was introduced to

Kannada literature by Baraguru Ramachandrappa, a writer who headed Karnataka Sahitya Akademi in 1993. Devi was invited by Baraguru in Karnataka to attend a literary programme. One of her short stories “Standayni” was first translated into Kannada by H. S. Srimathi. In an interview H. S. Srimathi said:

Mahasweta Devi stayed with our family during her first visit to Karnataka. On learning that I was interested in translations, she gave me a blanket permission to translate all her works into Kannada. Her word or encouragement made me translate some of her important works. (The Hindu, July 29, 2016).

Mahasweta Devi’s treatment of the marginalized was deromanticizing. She wrote on tribal people, Naxalite movements, Dalits, bonded labourers, prostitutes and so on, all of them who were a part of the marginalized group. She had worked endlessly for them and had portrayed the true political face of that era. Devi states in her Introduction to “Bitter Soil”:

I believe in documentation..... The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies; the feudal-minded land owner, his henchman, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower caste blood... My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters or the exploiting system. (x)

Mahasweta Devi was a committed artist who documented the past and the present struggle of the marginalized people. She was not only a writer but also a social-activist, editor and reporter. In the field of creative writing, she was able to make a distinct place for herself. She created her characters from real people whom she had encountered. She often said that her plots were based on actual events. She wove the oral histories, folk knowledge, people’s stories into her writings. To seek materials for her novels and short stories, she travelled from one place to

another. "The Queen of Jhansi" (Jhansir Rani), a biography of Jhansi Rani, the queen who revolted against the British rulers in India during the First Indian War of Independence of 1857 was published in 1956. Devi visited different sites where the queen fought so that she could get enough material for her novel. This proved Devi's commitment and interest in her job.

The year 1965 was a life-changing year in Mahasweta Devi's life. At that time, she was in Palamau, the poorest district in India. There she witnessed many societal issues which included exploitation at the hands of the money lenders, landlords, Government officials and policemen. Devi witnessed these problems existed in other tribal areas. Basic necessities such as food, education, shelter and healthcare were not provided to the marginalized. As a result of her experience in Palamau, she decided to fight for the welfare and life of those tribal and marginalized people. She discovered a world of difference between ordinary people and marginalized people.

In almost all of her novels, Palamau's influence can be seen. Mahasweta Devi began to highlight the plight of such people. Her stories included social instability, racial struggles and the mainstream people's misuse of land. Her works had a greater impact on readers and the literary community. Devi most well-known novel "Hazar Chaurashir Maa" (*Mother of 1084*) revolves around Brati Chatterjee, a young boy who joined the Naxalite movement and was killed and his mother mentally suffered.

Since long marginalized people have been treated as objects. Although the world is changing but marginalization has not ended. Marginalization on the basis of caste, class, gender still persist. Mahasweta Devi was able to highlight the prevalent injustice and aggressiveness in Indian society as a whole. Her short story "Draupadi" deals with the story of a tribal woman who is tortured and raped by policemen:

...She lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that indeed she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven" (Devi, 31).

Mahasweta Devi used folklore, myth and history to expose the stark realities of the exploitation of the marginalized by the mainstream. The essence of her writing has been pointed out in “The Adivasi Mahasweta” by Ganesh N Devy:

Mahasweta brought to those poor and harassed people with boundless compassion, which they instantly understood though they could neither speak her language nor she their. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken.

(Devy, 76)

Devi has fought many battles against the government for the rights of the tribal people. She aroused the necessity to fight for their rights and dignity within the oppressed class. She became ‘Didi’ and ‘Maa’ for thousands of suppressed poor people and tribals. Mahasweta Devi stated in conversation with Pankaj Singh:

... That I am born to do what I am doing for these so-called ‘criminal’ tribes. It is not my aspiration that I should be considered a great writer, win many awards and that there be a big noise about it. (Pointing towards her heart). Nothing reaches here. But an ordinary member of a ‘denotified tribe’ can take me anywhere. Only his cause can touch my hearts, nothing else. (Devi, 38)

Mahasweta Devi had placed the marginalized people as the victims of economic exploitation, caste and class discrimination and sexual exploitation. They had become the essence of pain, anguish and sufferings. But these victims never surrendered. They carried out their struggle against the corrupt political system, “Romtha”, “Titu Mir”, “The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh”, “Andharmanik”, “Nati” etc are some of the texts that were set in pre-independent India. They portrayed the tyranny of the ruling classes. Instead of providing protection and basic necessities to the indigenous people, the government was murdering them when they were protesting for their rights, for their survival. No one seemed to be bothered, nobody

raised their voice against the injustice done to the poor marginalized people. Mahasweta Devi raised her voice against the ruling classes. We can find these instances in her works. Her stories became the voice of the marginalized people which included tribals, women and Dalits. Her Palamau stories dealt with the sufferings of various tribes like Santhals, Lodhas, Mundas and Shabars. Her stories were neither romantic nor fantasy. They were written with Devi's own experiences, which she had while staying with these people in their land. She never depicted a single falsehood in her stories, Her stories were real and were meant to expose monopoly of feudalism over land and poor people. In Introduction to *Five Plays*, Samik Bandyopadhyay states:

Her plays and stories are often located
in communities of the fringe, outside the
dominant upper caste milieu. (viii)

Marginalization is an important aspect in Mahasweta Devi's works. They show how these people were deprived and denied of their rights and existence. Marginalization had taken away the social, economic and political rights of an individual. It had completely detached him from the society. People were marginalized due to their low status in India. The lower classes or castes were treated like beasts. Devi's famous play *Bayen* depicts this marginalization clearly. The emotional and physical wounds imposed by the society on a woman is portrayed in this play. The protagonist Chandi Dasi belongs to the dalit community. She is a dom, whose duty is to bury dead animals. Although the male member of the community performs this job. But here Chandi Das carries out the job of burrying dead animals because her father has died and there is no other male member in her family. Mahinder is another important character who works in a mortuary. He transforms human dead bodies into skeleton by removing flesh from their bodies Chandi Dasi and Mahinder get married and a baby boy is born to them. They named him Bhagirath. The illiterate and people of the society force her to stay away from the community because they think that Chandi is eating dead children. Even her own husband, Mahinder believes that she has become a bayen-witch. The superstitious society starts torturing her mentally, emotionally and physically.

Another short fiction of Mahasweta Devi related to marginalization is *Rudali*. It is the story of a subaltern woman and her

struggle for survival. Sanichari is the main character of this story. She lived in utter poverty. She becomes a professional moaner, one who cries at the funerals of the upper-caste malikes. Rudalis are hired when someone from upper-caste dies. Tears are commodified. "In the Metamorphosis of Rudali", Arjun Katyal states:

Grief is turned into a commodity and
mourning is a labor. If sorrow is
controlled by the imprisoned, tears can
be used as a produce, a source of earning
by professional mourners. (Katyal, 5)

Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" exposes the concepts of motherhood where a woman is exploited by ethnic, gender and class ideologies. Jashoda, a marginalized Brahmin woman is compelled to become a professional wet-nurse to support her family when her husband loses his feet in an accident. Her breasts become the only means to earn food for her family. To secure her job, she becomes a child bearing machine in order to have continuous production of milk. She is praised and revered for this job. But she loses everything when she reaches her middle age. She is forgotten by her husband, her children and by the society. She is left to die alone.

Chhoti Munda and His Arrow is Mahasweta Devi's historical novel depicting the advasi struggle. The novel deals with Munda tribes. The members of this tribe are considered trustworthy, honest and straight forward. The masters of the Munda tribes are the rich money lenders. They make these tribes work hard as slaves. These tribes are not free. They have no house to live in and no land is provided to them. They are aware of the fact that education can only bring changes in their lives. But they are denied of education as well. If somehow a boy goes to school, the teacher scolds him and tells that "education is not for Munda, only the children of Brahmin, Lala and Kayastha will study." This text portrays not only the plight of the tribals but also the horrid picture of the *Dusad*, the *Ganju*, the *Chamars*. All of them are crushed under the government machinery. Chhoti Munda, the protagonist of the novel feels:

The day is coming Munda will not be
able to live with their identity. In all
national development work, they will
have to be one with those who, like

Chhagan, are oppressed of the land, and work as field hands, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then there'll be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the 'Munda' identity will live only at the festivals in soul exchange.
(126)

Bonded labour and slave tradition are alternative sides of the same coin. They adivasi were kept as bonded labours. However, Bonded labour was considered illegal, the hypocrisy of the government is revealed in these lines spoken by a minister :

Look how may loop holes the wording offers.. the State Government may confer powers... why not will confer?.... the Central Government knows full well that if an Act is passed for the welfare of Adivasi or untouchable, it should never be implemented.... Are untouchables and adivasis a factor? And landlord, money lender, landed farmer. These are the pillars of the government who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote?..... they know if the Act is implemented these poor souls will die at the hands of the boss and the moneylender."(*Chhoti Munda and His Arrow*, 279-280)

Mahasweta Devi works clearly revealed how the power of politics kept the marginalized people outside the map of mainstream. They never regarded these people as Indians. They were excluded everywhere. They were ostracized. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Devi states:

The tribal and the mainstream have always been parallel ... The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel... They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities... They are denied everything... That is why I started writing about the tribal movement and the tribal world. (31)

Devi had documented the corruption of the political system and upper class against the marginalized in most of her works. Some of them are *Aranayer Adhikar* (Rights to the Forest), *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire), *Sindhu Kanhur Daakey*, *Bitter Soil*, *Bait*, *Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, *Bedanabala*, *Outcast*, *Old Women*, *Imaginary Maps* etc. Her works are authentic documentation of the hypocrisy of the so-called civilized group.

The term “marginalized” was coined by the social revolution of the 1970s. They can be seen in all places including urban, sub-urban and rural areas. They exist everywhere but are invisible. They are victims of violence, assault, discrimination and social stigma. They are exploited and abused and mistreated by the subordinate class. According to Latin, ‘Marginality’ is so thoroughly demeaning, for economic well-being, for human dignity, as well as for physical security. Marginal groups can always be identified by members of dominant society, and will face irrevocable discrimination.”

Gender inequality is also a type of marginalization. In other words it can be said that women are a part of marginalized groups especially, those belonging to lower classes, lower castes, and tribal communities. They face multiple forms of violence and endure several hardships. They are sexually exploited and lack social support. When it comes to education, marginalized women face many challenges. They are seen as wives and as child bearers. Child marriages and early pregnancies prevent them from attending schools. The position of dalit women is more vulnerable.

The various tribal groups too faces discrimination and are categorized under marginalized group. The total population of scheduled tribes in India is around 84.3 million. However, they vary from state to state in terms of population and numbers. They are economically and socially disadvantaged and are dependent on forest resources. They are landless people and they work as bonded labourers with very low income. They live in utter poverty. They struggle hard for their survival. Basic necessities like food, education health facilities are denied to them. They are physically, mentally, economically and socially tortured by the society. Since many centuries, they are deprived of many civic facilities. Illiteracy rate among them is very high.

Mahasweta Devi witnessed the wretched condition of the marginalized people, especially the tribals within the Indian society. Through her writings, Devi had tried to stand in support of these people. She tried to capture the pain and torment in these people's life. For about fifty years, she wrote about the dispossessed people. She travelled from one state to another to know more about their lives. She mixed freely with these people. She exposed the truth of such a system that kept the tribal people in utter poverty, hunger and diseases. In her short story "Little Ones", Devi writes:

Starvation over generations can reduce ordinary sized human beings to pygmies of course, the starving Aagariyas are savagely angry at a system under which some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve! For I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed million (ix).

Throughout her literary career, Mahesweta Devi portrayed the authentic issues of the marginalized people in the country. Except few, her writings focused on the lives of the underdogs, particularly the Dalits and tribal people. She tried to become the voice of these voiceless. She was of the opinion that resistance can be the only way to disrupt power and authority. Devi came forward to show through various accounts how the adivasis are "true sons and daughters" of the soil. Ganesh Devy states in an interview to 'The Hindu' :

India has learnt to think of these people (the tribals) as a liability, as an economic burden and a threat to excellence. The Government has either adopted an approach of minimum interference as in the past or policy of assimilation. (29th July, 2016)

Mahasweta Devi was no doubt a committed artist. She felt extremely sad after seeing the plight of the marginalized people. She worked hard to uplift the deprived class. Her writings acted as documentation of the marginalized people who were oppressed and victimized by the agents of politics.

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