



The Voice of the Oppressed: A Subaltern Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi and The Hunt*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, an eminent writer wrote a lot about the rights of subaltern women a lot in her novels, short stories and essays. Subaltern women were oppressed both the society as well as in their community. In this paper Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and in the *Hunt* shows how women of subaltern group respond to the society vehemently. If in *Draupadi* the women show vehement power in exposing the hollowness of the law then in the story of the *Hunt* the women have the power to resist and protect herself from the lusty eyes of men and protect her and her community. This paper would the stories from the subaltern point of view and would answer women from every corner of the society has equal rights.

Keywords- subaltern, postcolonial.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi has been an acclaimed writer who has been working and fighting for the marginals for a decade. Mahasweta Devi's first published a piece of writing for Tagore's *My Boyhood Days*, a Bengali children magazine. In 1956 came her first major work *The queen of Jhansi*, a fictionalized biography of the women ruler of the princely state in north India who fought the British in 1857 in the first war of independence. This work was quickly followed by *Nati* (1957), *Madhreyamadhur* (1958), *Yamuna ka teer* (1958), *Etotuku Asha* (1959) and *Premtara* (1959)- these were certain romances and novels that formed a virtual kaleidoscope of India lives.

She has been the voice of the oppressed and marginalized. In an interview which was published as an appendix to the *Queen of Jhansi*, she said;

In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view. She once said while accepting the Ramon Magsaysay award;

My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the maintain stream society from the poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an

attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our won true faces in the process. (Mahasweta Devi, Ramon Magsaysay award acceptance speech, 1997).

Indian literary scene has a drastic change as far as women writings are concerned. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Gita Hariharan, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi- have popularized the oeuvre of feminist writings and women writings in general. These women writers made literature the mirror and shown the multidinous aspects of society, the complex, demanding and far arrangements that men and women make with one and another. Women find literature the most expressive form of art which is true to women's experience.

The Subaltern

History is the recorded struggle of people for ever increasing freedom and for newer higher realism of the human process. The common people possess the capacity to make history. In fact, the historic initiative of the masses has time and again produced social cataclysms that have changed the world. The subaltern approach is a new trend of writing, a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist and communist party leader refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political or other hierarchy. From the Latin roots sub – below and alternus – “all others” subaltern is used to describe someone who has been marginalized.

The founder of the Subaltern studies is Ranajit Guha and the trend of subaltern studies prevailed in India in the last twenty of the 20th centuries. Some of his important books and Articles were “Elementary Aspects of Peasant Emergency inn colonial India”, Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1973), Popular Movements and Middle-Class Leadership in the late colonial India and others.

Gayatri Spivak has become an authoritative voice of the post-colonial period since the publication of her essay Can the subaltern Speak? She has extended her discourse to a large variety of topics such as Marxism, Feminism and Deconstruction. Spivak through her cultural and critical theories tries to challenge the legacy of colonialism. She refused to admit the notion that the Western World is having an upper hand over the Third World as it is more purified from the grossness of acute barbarism. Her critical discourse raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society. And their empowerment. Spivak borrows the term subaltern from Gramsci refers to the unrepresented group of people in the society (Gramsci 55). Spivak in her “Can the subaltern Speak” deeply speaks for the oppressed women of the subaltern group.

Mahasweta Devi and the Subaltern

Rabindranath Tagore once wrote for the simplicity and beauty of Santhal women in his *Shyamali*



The Santhal women comes
Walking down the pebble covered path
under shimul tree
Tanu's Black body is surrounded by a
thick saree
Someone who is the master of the art
Which black birds in the woods
In the clouds and clouds of Shraavan
Material Finding
I know that woman has written

.....
A women's simple power is dedication
Filled with the tenderness of care
I 'he put the wire to pay for the
work.....
The santal women bought the basket
full of soil.

Like Tagore, Mahasweta Devi being an extraordinary writer, worked for the simple beautiful has been writing, working and fighting for the marginalized tirelessly for the past six decades. She has been the amalgamation of an activist and a writer who has carried both the duties fearlessly. These concerns can be seen in the works such as Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the forest), Nairehite Megh (clouds in the south western Sky), Bashai Tudu, Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants and Rebels, Dust on the Road and a number of articles published in various newspapers and magazines. Mahasweta Devi's social activism took concrete shape in 1965 when she visited Palamau, a remote and impoverished district in Bihar whom she calls "a mirror of tribal India". Mahasweta Devi, in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reflects:

In 1965, I started going to Palamu.... Palamu is still an inaccessible district, the poorest in the state of Bihar.... In such backward, feudally oppressed district, the bonded labor system survives. The bonded labor system was introduced by the British. They created a new class, which took away tribal and converted the rivals into debt bonded slaves...from Kashmir to the Indian Ocean and from East to west in every state...there are more than forty thousand bonded laborers. Thus, the bonded labor system in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation became clear

Devi, being concerned with the peripheral existence of women of Bengal within social, political and economic nexus depicts that how the conditions of tribal and Dalit women is more pathetic because they are marginalized on several grounds- due to their lack of education,

due to their proletariat class-status, socio economic dispossession and above all their gender. In the words of Simon de Beauvoir (The Second Sex)

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute-She is the Other.

Draupadi and The Hunt: The subject of Subalternity

"Draupadi" manifests the oppression on the tribal Santali community through the persona of Draupadi, who resembles the Draupadi of Mahabharata bearing the brunt of oppression of men around her. The deprivation of the tribals of their rights and uprooting of them from their native habitant's build an important theme in Devi's writing of "tribal history", she says in an interview 'is not as a continuity an Indian historiography.... the tribals are still being evicted from their land.

The story is set in a realistically delineated forest background somewhere at a sylvan setting (around the forest of Jharkhand) in southern Bengal. Dopdi is skilled in a tribal guerilla fighting and she is fighting for the rights of Santhals people in the forest area. Dopdi along with her husband Dulna Majhi led an angry mob against the oppression of an exploitative landlord who makes them poorly paid slaves. They are fighting for their rights on land and forest and not driven by some pointless vendetta. The landlords are successful in gaining the confidence of the State power in their scheme of exploiting the tribals. Dopdi, along with her husband and community people is successful in killing the oppressive landlord Surja Sau who had once denied to give to give the poor people even a drop of water during draught.

Dopdi escapes her dwelling and takes the course of the forest. As she walks, she thinks of her fate. As if she is caught the betrayal of two Santhals led to the killing of her husband and

the groups. Dopdi is traced by the police and is brought to the thana and is gangraped. Yet Dopdi is not a woman to surrender to the satanic torture but stands to the cause of rebellion of the Santhals for their land and minimum human rights. When is called by the Army officer in the morning Doupdi refuses to wear a sari and says by howling?

You asked them to make me up, won't you see how they made me (39).

She shouts at him to "knauter" her because the police are not man enough, they can torture and kill the Santhals in fake encounter. The audacity of Dopdi perplexes the Army Officer whose sense of pride is challenged by simple tribal women. The gangraped mutilated body of the tribal lady becomes the mirror where the officer can see the reflection of his filthy nature. Like Draupadi in Mahabharata was disrobed and lord Krishna came to save her here dropdi didn't find any divine grace to save her. This shows the sardonic reality of India whose futile promise of an integrated nation, equality and justice are fully exposed in this story.

In the Shikar or the Hunt Mary Oraon was born as a consequence of her mother's seduction by a foppish Australian Sahib. Immediately after impregnating Vikhni (Mary's smother) the sahib sold his property at kuruda and went forever back to Australia. Mary now a youthful maiden works at the house of the present owner of the property, Prasadji. Being white in complexion she faces identity crisis and is not accepted in her community. She therefore marries Jalim a Muslim who is hardworking and honest like her.

The story reveals the exploitation of the oraon people when a contractor Tehsildar Singh comes to forest area of kuruda and offers Prasadji to sell the latters shal trees. The tribal people who are innocent and poor agree to work at the low wage and at the lure of alcohol. It is Mary who is concerned of the forests of Kuruda which provide the livelihood of the tribal

peoples in many ways. Mary is a string and determined lady who resists tehsildar lust for her by threatening with a dagger. She resembles Dopdi Mejhenn resisting the oppression and exploitation of her people by wealthy landlords and Mahajan's. At the night of the women's hunting ceremony, Mary plans a big hunt by laying a trap for the voluptuous Tehsildar. She invites him to meet her at the heart of the forest at the dead of night. Tehsildar goes there following his sensuous instinct only to meet his end at the blows of Mary's dagger. Ter killing the beast Mary takes a bath in the nearby streamlet she is reincarnated as a new woman free from the clutches of Tehsildar, the personification of the economic and sexual exploiter of the miserable Oraons. As she is walking away from the forest at dawn to meet Jamal, she thinks of going away from the Kurada forest by train. This walk is symbolic journey of Mary from the threat of economic and gendered enslavement to her newly acquired emancipation.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi never called herself feminist. Her project is to bring into light the excluded subject in postcolonial nation-the subaltern Indian woman who is prepressed not only by the hegemonic colonial and elitist postcolonial discourses but by the project of patriarchy. The dual working of racism and sexism attempts to make her voice completely silenced.

She once said: For a long time now, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall. The conscientious reader is turning away from them in revulsion. What can be more surprising than that written living in a country bedeviled with so many problems...should fail to find material for their work in their own country and the people.

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