



CONCERN FOR SUBALTERN IN THE WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI AND ARUNDHATI ROY

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper is a humble attempt to explore the themes and concerns of the two activist writers- Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer whose works are translated in English and Arundhati Roy, a writer in English, in their works of fiction and non-fiction. They have always felt that the documentation of exploitation of the suppressed class is one of the ways to rebel against the exploiting sections of the society. Wherefore this study is intended to throw light on their valuable and practically helpful contribution to Indian Literature and society as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are the well-known Indian women writers of post-colonial era. They are not only the fiction writers but also development critics as well as activist writers. They have represented the marginalized section of the society in their writings. These two writers have been living their lives with the oppressed class to understand their problems and feel their difficulties and fight for the fundamental rights of the oppressed community through their writings and social movements. So it becomes imperative to outline the shape of the 'beast' (injustice) which has been attacking the subalterns time and again. Both the writer activists have always felt the need of authentic documentation of injustice and exploitation of the lower class, which can effectively expose their naked truths. This kind of documentation can prove to be another form of protest against exploitation and to an extent a way

through which the beast can be brought down as Arundhati Roy expresses.

Themes and Concerns in Mahasweta Devi's works

Mahasweta Devi was born in the year 1926 in the city of Dacca in Bangladesh. She was born into a literary family. After finishing a master's degree in English literature from Calcutta University, she began working as a teacher and journalist. She started writing from an early age for various literary magazines. She has to her credit over 20 collections of short stories and over a 100 novels primarily in her native language, Bengali.

She was influenced by the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the major themes of works of Mahasweta Devi involves position of tribal communities within India. She has been working her heart and soul since a very long time for the political, social and economic development and advancement of these communities. She has been a regular contributor to

several literary magazines as 'Bortika' dedicated to the cause of oppressed communities in India. In 1984, she got retired from her job as an English lecturer at Calcutta University only to concentrate more on her writing and to dedicate herself more towards the upliftment of these tribal communities.

At the time when Devi was financially weak, she began to turn her energies to writing. She started producing light fiction (romantic stories, ghost stories, family stories). In 1956, her first major work was published 'Jhansir Rani', a fictionalised biography of the woman ruler of a princely sate in North India who fought against the British in 1857 in the first war of Independence waged by Indian people. Devi was very much attracted by this woman warrior who was able to inspire and unite the common people to wage a war of resistance against British. So Devi decided that this would be the story that she had to write. This work was followed by her other works which were romances and novels which reflected a kaleidoscope of Indian lives. She had said that many more of her works would project the social realities which would form the main body of her fiction.

Further, she began to focus on serious writing. She published novels, stories and articles, wrote plays, text books and children's fiction, adapted folklore for young readers, and translated works in other languages. During this time, her writing had intense social purpose. She says though she started writing at an early age as a result of the literary environment in the family, social activism came into her writing much later.

There was a turning point in her writing in 1965 when she visited Palamau, a remote and impoverished district in Bihar which she calls 'a mirror of tribal India'. She had witnessed a very savage impact on indigenous society of absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect. The same kind of environment was subsequently observed by her in the other tribal districts of the country. Those districts were absolutely backward without education, healthcare, roads, and income. But exploitation and negligence by the landlords and the state were so high that the people were reduced to subhuman existence. Her Palamau experience where dismal conditions of the

tribal people were brought face to face and she also became aware of the fact that these people were largely excluded from official, mainstream history.

This exposure of the misery of people became the main focus of Devi's works. This is very much reflected in the novel 'Kavi Bandyoghoti Gayiner Jivan O Mrityu' which depicts the struggle of a low caste boy in 15th century Bengal.

Further, there was an astonishing convergence in her literary maturity and a deepening social awareness which was projected in her novel 'Hazar Churasir Ma (Mother of 1084)'. This novel projects the emotional struggles of a mother as she tries to understand her son's involvement in the naxalite movement and in the process undergoes the inner journey to understand her place as a wife and a woman in the hypocritical bourgeois society her son had rebelled against. This novel is important and significant in Devi's personal terms also. It is a parody of her own journey from urban middle class domesticity to a larger sphere which would be the main concern of her works, the age long exploitation of the tribals and the landless peasantry in rural Eastern India.

In the succeeding years, she would return to the naxalite movement in her works. In a few narratives, she had uncovered the bitter and bloody relationship between tribal communities and India's dominant classes and systems. She has focussed her works on certain topics and themes. History has always been a fascinating theme which is very clear through her work 'Jhansir Rani'. She has successfully used her fiction not only to resurrect the forgotten episodes of India's tribal and feudal past but also to highlight the acts of resistance to aggression and suppression which can be obviously seen in her 'Chotti Munda O Tar Teer'(Chotti Munda and his Arrow). Devi also has concentrated on subordination of women in Indian society in a few of her works like 'Outcastes', 'Daulati', 'Breast stories' etc. She acknowledges that a woman tends to be more vulnerable to exploitation because of her body. She also makes it clear that she looks at the class and not the gender problem. A pronounced class consciousness defines her writings.

The instinct that has brought together various topics and themes in her works is that of a

passionate opposition to the realities of social exploitation. Her fiction projects not only a strong sense of identification with the exploited and the marginalised but also an unshaken faith in their capacity for self-emancipation. The upliftment of the tribals has become Devi's life's mission because she feels that the tribals are the symbols of social oppression in modern India. The census report says that the estimated number of tribals is over 80 millions in several regions of the country. In Devi's own home state of West Bengal, there are over 38 tribal communities with a population of over 10 million. So Devi has used her writings to project the plight of this population to the country's mainstream society. She has explored the history of the Santals, Hos, Oraons, Kurunis, Mundas and other tribal communities in her fiction. She has been actively involved in the struggles of the tribal people and underprivileged class since 1976, apart from writing about them. The subject of her stories has become the subject of her life.

In the introduction to 'Agnigarbha', Devi has explained her mission as to write to the best of her abilities about these people who are still groaning of hunger, landlessness, indebtedness, bonded labour. She also has said that the burning passion and anger against the system which has failed to liberate these people from their horrifying constraints is the main source of inspiration in all her writings. When she felt restless about her writing which was not enough to help those people, she started involving herself in other social activities like being the founder of Palamau Zilla Bandhua Samiti, India's first bonded-labour organization with the help of a local journalist to eradicate the system of bonded labour.

After the death of her father in 1979, she started editing the Bengali quarterly 'Bortika' which her father used to edit and turned it into a forum where tribals and other underprivileged people wrote about their own life and problems. In 1984, she resigned her teaching job in Calcutta college where she had been teaching English literature since 1964 and became a full-time writer and activist. She wrote not only articles for many local newspapers but also investigative reports. Her topics ranged from police atrocities, failures in the implementation

of government programmes, exploitation of sharecroppers and miners, unemployment and landlessness, environment degradation, to the need to protect tribals' identity and rights.

Along with writing about the problems, she works along with these people for the redressal of their problem. She has been a part of the organization (Kheria-Sabar welfare society) which defends the rights of the tribals and promotes their material and cultural well-being. The organization has helped the tribals through various initiatives taken for the improvement of the basic necessities of their lives. She lives with the people she writes about and participates in their struggles and gives voice to their lives through her writing. Many people from remote rural areas in distress approach her for their problems daily which she looks into and makes referrals to her extensive network of contacts or personally intercedes by writing letters of complaints or petition to the government etc. Her fame as the advocate of the poor has been spread far and wide.

Themes and concerns in Arundhati Roy's works

Arundhati Roy was born in Shillong, to a Keralite Syrian Christian mother, the women's rights activist Mary Roy and a Bengali father, Ranjithroy, a tea planter by profession. She spent her childhood in Ayamanam in Kerala and in her career, she worked for television and movies and also wrote screenplays, appeared as a performer also. She has written her first novel 'God of Small Things' which is semi-autobiographical and a major part of this novel captures her childhood experiences in Aymanam. Various themes that can be found in the novel are Indian history and politics. In addition to these, Roy evaluates the class relations and cultural tensions. Forbidden love becomes one of the integral themes of the novel. Not only this 'love' in its different forms becomes the basic theme of the novel, social discrimination and betrayal at different levels also are the important concerns of Roy in the novel.

After her novel, Mrs Roy has devoted herself mainly to non-fiction and politics. She has got published her collection of essays and also has been working for social causes. She is a spokesperson of anti-globalisation. She criticizes strongly the approach of industrialisation and rapid development as currently being practised in India

which is clearly evident in her protest against Narmada Dam Project. Her concern for the tribal people and other underprivileged people is obvious through her campaigning along with activist Medha Patkar against Narmada dam project which would displace half a million people with a little or no compensation and without any basic facilities for these people.

Her concern is not only for underprivileged people but also for the people of the world. This aspect is reflected in the way she had responded to the US military invasion of Afghanistan. She has said that the bombing of Afghanistan is a heinous act of terrorism against the people of the world. She has questioned the utility of India's testing of nuclear weapons. She has also supported the 'Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha' a social movement for Adivasi land rights in Kerala in 2003.

She has also gone to the extent of criticizing the government armed action against the Naxalites in India. She has called it as a war on the poorest people in the country.

Conclusion

All the works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are the results of their feeling of certain responsibility of civic amelioration especially towards the marginalization of millions of their compatriots. They see themselves as catalysts rather than as leaders. There can be seen unity in their many interests – literature, journalism and social activism. By combining all the three, they have persistently championed the cause of the exploited and the marginalised. According to these writers, their writing and other activities are a part of an organic whole which can never be fragmented. And it is a fact that their social commitment has given more force to their work. The concepts of protest, fighting for one's rights, dignity and survival are the underlying themes in their works. They are very impatient with hypocrisy, complacency and indifference. They are deeply disturbed by looking at how the tribals and the poor have been abused and exploited and hence has set themselves a task of savagely exposing the realities and structures of social and economic exploitation of those underprivileged people through their writing and social activities till this day.

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