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LOCATING THE 'SUBALTERN' IN MULTI (DOMINANT) CULTURALISM: READING  
MAHASWETA DEVI'S *BREAST STORIES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to probe the fantasy and reality of multiculturalism, a concept and a practice that is designed to celebrate differences in a society where the voices of every individual and all ethnicities are equally heard and either glorified or ignored equally. How much of this fantastic vision prevails in the contemporary social scenario leaves much to be desired. Here is an enquiry of this problematic from a textual perspective of Mahasweta Devi's works which bring out the voices of the subaltern struggling to be heard amidst the sea of multicultural discourses which paradoxically still retain the dichotomy of the dominant and the subaltern. Through the analysis of her *Breast Stories* and the marginal locale occupied by her central characters, the paper tries to ascertain if the fantastic promise of multiculturalism is realized in a societal reality or whether it still is a distant dream. The paper intends to focus on the emergence of the concept of multiculturalism, its relevance for India, the way it gets negated with regard to the subaltern as seen from the textual world of Mahasweta Devi, the 'monologic' nature of pluralism, the problematic inherent in the unifying concept of Mother India in the contemporary Indian society, and a perspective on the alternate subaltern movement of the Pembilai Oruma and the circumstances and the consequences there of which becomes a commentary and an evaluation of the fickle nature of multicultural promise.

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"Speak English, Kiss French, Drive German, Dress Italian, Spend Arab, Party Caribbean" (Online quote on Multiculturalism). The idea of multiculturalism is the search for uniqueness and celebration of differences in a way that problematize the very structures and ethos of monologic unilinear discourses. In the West countries like Canada and USA have been examples of the simultaneous co-existence of multicultural ethnicities in which culture is associated with a particular ethnic community. USA has been boasting

of its melting pot culture where all contradictions get fused and the differences get dimmed with the current of progress and the flux of time. It apprehends a curious mixture in which the cultural uniqueness of each segment is lost /reduced resulting in a kind of 'mongrel' pieces. The more recent term that refers to a political and practical approach to this celebration of diversity is salad bowl which more or less situates the ideology of cultural inclusion and also deconstructs the question

of assimilation that results in the negation of diversity in itself.

The idea of a multicultural India is an ambitious postulate as put forth in the site of our national consciousness. The national anthem and the pledge are examples of this reality where India or Bharat is celebrated and its diversity carefully and skillfully negotiated. The very danger that India's neighbouring countries supposedly pose for this nation is also a dynamic move towards negotiating its pluralistic unity. "Mile sur mera Tumhara, to sur bane hamara" (Pandey) is a song of national integration developed in 1988 by Lok Seva Sanchar Parishad, written by Piyush Pandey, its music composed by Ashok Patki, and arranged by Louis Banks which is directed towards the idea of unity in diversity. In the site of that song national unity is equated with the mighty ocean which internalizes and fuses the various rivers of cultures. Strangely the metaphor of the sea negates the identity and individuality with regard to each "sur" signifying every distinct culture. It is here that the ideology of nationalism and those of multiculturalism are ambivalently problematized.

Sreelekha Mishra and Bharat Kumar comment that though the terms pluralism, diversity and multi culturalism are interchangeably used, each term is minutely different from one another. "Plurality talks about many, but are silent about the nature of many, silent about how the multiple forms are structured and how they relate to one another...Diversity refers to multiplicity which cannot be collapsible to one. The concept multiculturalism endorses the idea of difference and heterogeneity that is embodied in the concept of diversity"(64). Hence the concept of multiculturalism is all about negotiating the differences and not about fusing the heterogeneous elements under a single arbitrary yoke. It also undoes the advantageous position of the majority in the state apparatus and validates equality in terms of voices and presences. It is in this dubious context that an enquiry regarding the nature of the precept and practice of multiculturalism in India is apprehended and found ambivalent.

The textual enquiry is made from the perspective of the protagonists in Mahasweta Devi's

*Breast Trilogy* which is a requiem of the subaltern. The predicament of subalternity itself interrogates the claims of multiculturalism as subalternity is the discourse of the marginalized. Any enquiry into culture should be based on culture as lived experience and not as empty intellectual discussions in closed class rooms or seminar halls. In the introduction to *Agnigarbha* she points out that "life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics" (Devi 8). She strongly believed that history is made by ordinary people and tried to address the issue of the brutal suppression of the tribals and untouchables by the dominant power structures.

The application of the yardsticks of multiculturalism can be made into the textual world of Mahasweta Devi from a number of points of view. Primarily negotiating the differences in a value neutral perspective where each person / group can maintain his /its integrity with dignity while retaining its uniqueness is what constitutes the essence of multiculturalism. Every story in *Breast Stories* is a discourse on the binaries of domination/ subordination interrogating locations of power or/and the lack of it. In "Breast Giver", Jashoda is the protagonist whose economic subalternity is potentially pitched against the independence and exposure of Haldar women as they signify the ethos of liberal feminism and the liberating potency of the movement of nationalism. Jashoda, the Brahmin whose very caste symbolizes a multicultural ancestry is subjected to exploitation in a modern/ democratic set up. The pungent irony and sarcasm with which Mahasweta attacks the apparent celebration of pluralism and the significant reason for the absence of it in reality is communicated thus: "He lives in independent India, the India that makes no distinction among people, kingdoms, languages, varieties of Brahmins, varieties of Kayasthas and so on. But he made his cash in the British era, when *divide and rule* was the policy." (Devi 44). As we enter this unequal universe where money and power manipulate destinies, the entire notions of multicultural celebration of ethnicities are invalidated. The notion of subalternity in this instant

is the result of financial inferiority. Ironically the dominant in caste is subordinated to the dominant in class when the Brahmin Jashoda is commissioned to breast feed the children and grand children of the rich landlord Haldar who is a Kayastha. Paradoxically, in the end when Jashoda Devi dies of breast cancer, abandoned by her own and her master's children, "she was cremated by an untouchable" (Devi 75). Inequality in all its wide scope is theorized in the space of this story. Inequality of gender and that of the caste get doubled and its vicissitudes multiplied due to the unjust distribution of wealth in India, a sovereign, socialist republic. As Gayatri Spivak suggests the discourses of nationalism failed to deliver what it promised, the promise of a sea-change or a transformation in the lives of subaltern women. The discourse of nationalism as we encounter in the Indian Subaltern scenario can be reductionist regarding the need for the plural voices.

According to Mahasweta, the death of Jashoda is a collapse and destruction of Mother India there by signifying another symbol of arbitrary unity. The reference to Jashoda "as a parable of India after decolonization" (Spivak, Reading "Breast-Giver" 79) is a critical juncture which in the scope of this paper is brought out to facilitate a discussion on the problematic of the concept of Mother India or Bharat Mata. It becomes a paradox when this figure represents the entire essence of Indian nationalism in one single image, thus displacing the claims of the discourse of the other, who fail to conform to the ideological expectations of the term. The resplendent visual image of Bharat mata is so strongly ingrained in the Indian Psyche that alterities are at the fringes and once again, the subaltern in caste, class and locale are forever outside the nationalist project. Ironically it is the nationalism that boasts of unity in diversity.

In Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" subalternity is theorized in yet another way in which the dominant discourses have succeeded in displacing ethnicities with unique cultural heritage demythifying the image of a multicultural India. The subaltern Dopti is a deviant of Draupadi where even the name has been disfigured. No cosmic presence miraculously appears to clothe the disrobed Dopti

Mejhen. The subaltern locale is that of the displaced tribal on whom the dominant power structures in all its fury descend to destroy who is denied their fair share of the earth, sky and livelihood and who is represented as the "menacing other" (Spivak, "Foreword" 2) as they rise in defense of their cultural space in the fantastic tale of multicultural democracy. All state apparatus rise to keep such resistance under control so that the melting pot image of cultural unity remains intact and unopposed.

A number of signs emerge putting the claims of a pluralist/ multiculturalist India to task. Senanayak, the police chief is a tool of the government who politically occupies the site of power. The peasant – intellectual interface theorized in the story illuminates the cultural divide not only of India as a nation but Bengal as a state. The polished, educated Bengali used by the young intellectuals and the tribal tongue inhabit diverse realms of conflict. As Dopti is a Santal she feels proud that the traitors were not santals. "Dopti's blood was the pure unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi. From Champa to Bakuli, the rise and set of a million moons" (Devi 41). The rise and set of million moons strongly symbolize the wide expanse of cultural divide that fail to fuse into an ocean of arbitrary unity. The powerful image of Dopti Mejhen remains a unique symbol of the tribals in India, who is scheduled for special privileges because pluralist promises are not inclusive.

The third text that challenges the claims of multicultural India is "Behind the Bodice", the text that pungently satirizes the culture of media invasions into private interiors and the exploitation of the tribal poor at the hands of the cultural elite. The entire text is replete with biting sarcastic references thrown into the claims of national unity and the meaninglessness inherent in the entire discourse. The unity that India boast of is presented as flippant and shallow as the text opens in a country wide uproar and spread of the Khalnayak song "Choli ke pichche Kya hai? .What deep feelings of nationalism could not do was achieved by a movie song is a direct hit at the discourse of nationalism. The pluralist norms of India is subjected to severe ridicule by the cryptic comment that "Now from the

entire country, Indian Intellectuals not knowing a single Indian language meet in a closed seminar in the capital city and make the following wise decision known”( Devi 141). Another level of irony is through the character of Gangor, the wandering tribal woman whose breasts become the point of cultural critique when they are photographed and the photos bring money and fame to the intellectual and cultural elites which transform her into a prostitute as she was gangraped after being famous.

Mahasweta's text has been chosen for its reflection of reality in the Indian Scenario. Indian constitution has been hailed for its accommodation of the different rights of a variety of ethnic, religious, cultural groups within a liberal democratic frame work and the constitution also recognizes various religious laws and micro politics with educational and employment quotas for certain classes of people. In spite of a lapse of 6 decades, the promise of equal rights exists for many in a documented form and is not fulfilled in reality, The subaltern is still in many respects a subaltern necessitating movements like the Pembilai Oruma as an alterforce to male centred trade unions and dominant political parties who failed to accommodate the other. The emergence and the quick spread of resistance movements like Maoism also signifies unfulfilled promises, displaced locales, suppressed selves and silenced voices in a country who claims to be integrationist accommodating differences and providing each according to his need. The point argued here through the effect of the real in a Mahasweta textual universe is that the multiculturalism in India is yet to be a reality. Her works can also be considered as a clarion call for radical change at the structural level resulting in a more egalitarian society. It is a fantastic utopia which is possible if we can transform it into a space where multiple voices coexist simultaneously making possible a rich cultural mosaic in a post multicultural scenario.

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