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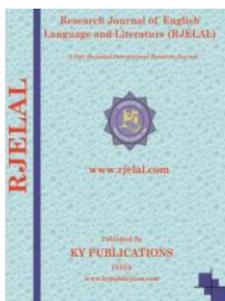
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## THE PLIGHT OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN MODERN INDIA: A SUBALTERN STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S "LITTLE ONES"

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### ABSTRACT

The term Subaltern refers to a class of people subject to the dominance of another powerful class. The oppressed class is politically oppressed economically exploited, and sexually harassed. Many a time their history is misrepresented and their identity would be associated with the negative stereotypes. Hence under this subaltern category come the people of Aboriginal communities, the Blacks, the colonized subjects, women, etc. Mahasweta Devi, being the champion of the rights of the Tribes living in Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, Mahasweta Devi has exposed the sufferings and struggles of these tribals who have been oppressed since the British hegemonic rule through her fiction. The short story "Little Ones", found in her collection *Bitter soil* has been analyzed as subaltern study discussing the issues of the tribes living in Palamau region.

Key words: Subaltern, hegemonic, exploited, oppressed, tribes

Mahasweta Devi is considered the Crusader of the people of Tribal communities living in various North Indian states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Having a heart filled with sympathy and compassion for these people, Devi went to the interior regions of the tribes and lived among them. For her presentation of tribal life in her literary works, she has been honoured and awarded at international level. Her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right of the Forest) fetched her Sahitya Academy Award. For her literary contributions dealing with tribal life and her social activities centered on tribal welfare brought her Ramon Magsaysay award from the government of Philippines. In addition to this the highest Indian literary award – Granapth Award, Padma Sri, and Bharath Vibhusan Awards, having been given to her,

have got themselves honoured, as she used to bestow all the prize money for the welfare of the tribes. Because of her writings the manacles, found in the picture of Birsa Munda, a nineteenth century young tribal leader who revolted against the British Government for the rights of his people, has been erased by the Government.

*Bitter Soil* is a collection of four short-stories entitled "Little Ones", "Seed", "Witch" and "Salt". "Bitter Soil" refers to the region of Palamua, a district formed in 1892, now north western part of the young state Jharkhand carved out of Bihar. It is bitter because the people living here has had only bitter experiences of life characterized by poverty, oppression and exploitation because of the upper hand of the mainstream society and the irresponsibility of the ruling system. This region is

characterized partly by rich forest giving shelter for wild animals like tiger and elephant, minerals and raw materials and partly by arid land where very poor, educationally under developed tribes live. These tribes include Oraons, Cheros, Mundas, Ganjus, etc., They have become victims of wageless labour and bonded labour because of the money minded greedy and selfish mainstream society. Bonded labour and wageless labour are the means of economic exploitation. They can be also considered social evils.

The tribes of Palamau were oppressed by the hands of money – lenders and land owners. They can be considered the subalterns in terms of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who used the word “Subaltern” to refer to a class of people subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class. The subaltern Studies form a sub – discipline within the field of Postcolonial Studies. Ian Buchanan says that the aim of the Subaltern Studies is

.....to examine the formation of subaltern classes in a variety of settings in south East Asia, but principally India and its near neighbours,... with the aim of providing a kind of counter – history, to address the imbalances of official histories, which tend to focus exclusively on the affairs of the state and the ruling class (469)

Mahasweta Devi, as a champion of the rights of the tribes brings into light the actual condition of the tribes in contrast to the official list of welfare schemes and the steps taken by the concerned ministerial department which are focused in the lime light through instruments like media. It cannot be denied that the governments have taken measures to develop the life of the tribes. But, it is a question whether they have reached these people in proper sense. The MPs, M.L.As, B.D.Os, and other officials swallow the money granted for the upliftment of them and the police who have to stand for the protection of the tribes would stand by the side of the mainstream society which includes the money lenders and the land lords who have oppressed the tribes. Mahasweta Devi locates the reason for the poverty

of the tribes in the land system which was designed and devised during the British rule. The land owner’s feudal mental make up and greediness make the tribes poor, under developed and starved to death. And, Devi says in his Introduction to *Bitter Soil* Says:

..... Caste and class exploitation and the resistance of the exploited ones are rooted in India’s land system. I say ‘India’, though the location of these stories is Palamau. Palamau is a mirror of India (Devi, “Introduction,” *Bitter Soil*, vii)

The first story “Little Ones” in *Bitter Soil* deals with the issue of malnutrition which makes the *adivasis* dwarfs. In order to improve the condition of the uneducated and poor tribes, as part of the welfare scheme, the government sends relief which, it is believed, is swallowed by the officers like the special relief officer and tehsildar. “Little Ones” relates the experience of an honest relief officer, full of sympathy for the aborigines having a strong will to provide them relief not for only one year but a permanent one, with the “little ones” – who are believed to be either small tribal children or ghosts. But they are pigmy size adults hiding in the forest to escape the wrath of the Government at their revolt.

A very honest officer was needed to execute the welfare scheme for the tribes in the village Lohri, a desert like place officially in Ranchi district, as people used to refuse to visit such eerie place or it becomes impossible for them to keep the relief material under their control. The little ones stole them away. It is also suspected that only the officials swindle the charity goods . When the officer was selected, he was informed that Lohri was a “damaned terrible place”(Devi,1), where people did not lead an honest way of living whatever relief materials were taken, it would be stolen. Further, the relief officer was surprised to hear that the thieves were not men and women but little boys and girls. Another story was narrated to the relief officer. In Lohri, once the Aagariya tribes lived. They were the iron miners and produced iron implements. They believed that they had the sole right of extracting iron from that place. They had a proud king Logundih and his eleven brothers all of whom married one woman. Logundih felt proud that

he was more powerful than the sun. The Sun God came down and fought with Logundih. Logundih died in the battle and his escaped wife gave birth to the son, Jwalamukhi. In revenge, the Sun cursed the Aagariyas that the wealth they earn from iron would burn to ashes. Though it is considered a jungle tale, it has its own symbolic significance in association with their actual life during the contemporary period.. They were never ready to involve in farming. Even if they were given farms by the government, they would sell it to the Mahajans. Further, they would raise so many questions such as "Where's the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm?" (Devi, 3). Yet, they cannot be fully blamed for their refusal. Their sentiments with reference to iron ore and the place was not properly realized, handled and respected by the then Government of India, which sought for iron ore in Lohri village and blasted out the hills, sacred to the Aagariyas, against their will.

The Aagariyas revolted and attacked the people mining the hill. Then, they disappeared themselves inside the hill. The government searched for a month. None disappeared from any other village except Kubha. The police burnt Kubha village and imposed punitive taxes on all other Aagariya villages and oppressed them in a cruel way.

On his way, the relief officer heard many mysterious wailings from the forest hills in the name of songs. The person who accompanied him was carrying a gun. He said that he carried it out of fear of the Aagariyas hiding in the hills, who might come at any time. Moreover, he was warned by the block development officers about the "Little Ones" who stole the relief materials such as rice and Milo. The BDO told him that the little ones might not be small kids but only ghosts, because their looks had been different.

After hearing a number of stories, threatening and warnings, the relief activity began with the construction of camp tents. The relief officer had also decided of a medical camp. He was ready to offer food and one rupee as daily wages for the village boys to work as volunteers while the tehsildar said that they would work for food alone.

The tehsildar was not ready to take in – charge of the stores saying.

"Things get stolen. And those who do the stealing are not human" (14)

With the help of ten Aagariya village boys, the camp activities were carried out successfully. Mahasweta Devi gives a comment on the character of the tehsildar also: "Every year, he steals from the relief and consolidates his own affairs. He is extremely corrupt...." (14). But the new relief officer was ready to take the relief materials to the very place of the tribes. He was happy and satisfied about the proceedings of the camp. One day, he heard the sounds of disturbance in the relief materials, when he was sleeping. Immediately he got up and rushed to find that the Aagariya boys disappeared into the forest and two sacks of rice and milo were missing.

The relief officer ran and followed them. The thieves were not spirits but only humans but so small that they might be small children.

When the relief officer went near them, he realized that they were not children but adults shrunk to dwarf sizes due to malnutrition. They were Aagariya tribes who killed the workers who had mined their hills. The oldest among them laughed and said:

We're not kinds. We're the Aagariya of Kubha village.... we protected the sanctity and honour of our sacred hillock by cutting you down; and Since then, we've been forest dwellers. No one was able to catch us. Not one police man or sipahi, no one.... The other Aagariyas keep us alive continuously on the run, not being able to eat. Most of us are dead now.... The Aagariya help us. It's because of the revolt at Kubha that we're in this state. The revolt at Kubha...(19-20)

The dwarf Aagariyas madly laughed and showed the relief officers the secret parts of their bodies which were unnaturally thin and scaly.

Mahasweta Devi, about the story "Little Ones" writes:

“Little Ones” was born of tribal experience. My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger. (Devi, ix).

According to Mahasweta Devi, the tribes of India were not taken care of by the Government in a proper way. They were oppressed and exploited by the mainstream society. The wealth of Nature such as forest and hills was exploited and deteriorated by the Government in the name of wild life reserve and mining works and it shakes the foundation of source of life of the tribes who live in close harmony with nature. And these issues are discussed by Mahasweta Devi and in this sense, the tribes are “Subalterns” suffering in a false land system where their rights were not properly recognized but neglected. The land system established during the British reign was not changed by the Government of India after Independence. And the British system in their colonies always had been exploitative in nature. But, after Independence, it should have been change considering the condition of the people, but the rulers did not take it very seriously as it did not affect the mainstream society. Only when the tribes revolt, their welfare is thought.

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