



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

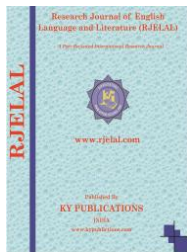
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

WOMEN OF METTLE: CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY IN THE CONTEXT OF MAHASHWETA DEVI'S *TILL DEATH DO US PART*

Dr. POONAM DAGA

Guestfaculty English, Ratlam

doi: doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.275



ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali writer and a social activist used her writings as a weapon against the social dogmas and taboos. She fought for the downtrodden and tribal regions of society through the magic of her pen. Her women characters are the medium of her fiery approach against the hegemony of society. This paper is an attempt to throw light on the challenging heroines of her translated story collection *Till Death Do Us Part*. It is an attempt to understand the different ways in which the women characters disapprove the constraints of orthodox Indian society.

Key words – dogmas, downtrodden, hegemony, mettle, orthodox, taboos

In an interview Krishna sobti says that “The deepest part of a creative writer is his or her honesty and concern to reach to the truth, to look into things, not at them.” Mahashweta Devi truly belongs to such category of writers. The daughter of an affluent and cultured family stands out as a writer for her fearless and purposeful writings. She used her pen as a social responsibility. She introduced herself as a very ruthless and analytical writer who writes in order to make people think and feel not to make them sleep. The creator of 100 novels and 20 short story collections won every award that our nation has to bestow.

Mainly she wrote in her native language Bengali but her powerful stories about the dispossessed along with her activism on their behalf have made her one of the best known and most frequently translated of India's authors. *Till Death Do Us Part* is a story collection of five translated stories which were originally written in Bengali in four different decades. Originally the stories were titled- Bhalobasha (1963), Talaq(1973), Kabipatni (1985), Kagaboga Geetika(1986) and Bolechhilo Pani(1995).

All the five stories are centered on five elderly women who are suffering, struggling and entrapped in different boundaries of society. Yet they search their unusual ways to defy social as well as masculine hegemony. First story, *The Divorce* exceptionally portrays the reunion of an elderly couple. After thirty five years of happy and contended life Kulsum and Arshad suddenly find themselves at the verge of separation one day. Arshad utters the word Talaq for three times during a heated argument which was a paralyzing moment for kulsum. Thirty five years of togetherness is questioned with repetition of just a word. Islamic system declares it to be a sin if she continues to live with Arshad. She is compelled to seek shelter at a place other than her own. In the hope of comfort and empathy she turns to her sisters but soon realizes that they are emotionless manikins only interested in her wealth. Circumstances and distance make Arshad and Kulsum aware of their love for each other. The only solution suggested by one of her family relative is that kuli needs to get married to another man. After sometime she can divorce that man and can live with Arshad again. Kuli rejects this solution and challenges

the Islamic divorce system with her decision of living with Arshad in Calcutta under the same roof though not as husband and wife but as companions.

Devi knows exactly what emotions to derive from the readers. We feel sympathy for the woman in next story who has no one to talk to but herself. Her name is Mohini. Mohini was declared as Sadanand's wife of previous birth when she was only three and apparently puts her strings of beads around his neck at a fair. People who witnessed this scene called it a sport of the gods. Sadanand and Mohini turns this sport of gods into reality later. But conversation between the couple had been stopped since sixteen years. "Their sons left home and this unhappiness caused Mohini to contract the talking- to- oneself disease." Mohini is the lonely mother who could only complain for the mistakes of her husband regarding financial matters and not putting any effort in bringing back her younger son who has left the home stolen precious belongings. This made her babble all the time to which Sadanand objects. Mohini constrains herself right from that moment and an invisible Kagaboga becomes the mediator between the couple. She limits her words and communicates only the needful to Sadananda that to through Kagaboga. She proves herself as a woman capable of surviving in isolation with handful of desires. Her self-confidence is revived with the renovation of her house and the only desire left is to install an image of Lakshmi for welfare of her sons. The saga of Kagaboga ends with the last breath of Sadanand. Mohini is the representative of all women who has courage to subjugate their desires.

Life brings sorrows and joys alike. It is what a man does with them- not what they do to him- that is the true test of his mettle. Devi's women are the winners in the test of their mettle because they react bravely with the sorrows and misfortunes of life. As in the third story, The Poet's Wife the central character Prafullkamal is wife of an old and blind poet and the only care taker of her husband. Their son is the rare visitor in their house whose face they hardly remember. A local organization selects the poet to felicitate him but not with any real intention to honor him instead due to their low budget and nil response from the artists of higher rank. Kamal agrees to receive the citation on her husband's behalf. Being

secluded for years from social life it was not easy for her to face so many people together. She attends the function in her second hand sari, brass jewelry and with a speech dictated by her husband to let his presence felt. The crowd of audience were only interested in a singer Pamela and not in introduction of an unrecognized poet. Kamal could not get chance to deliver full speech due to sudden entrance of the singer Pamela and returns humiliated. She shuts the door of her house again as a sign to show a clear no to the cruel society and prefers to manage on her own with her limited sources.

The remaining two stories throw light on the identity of women in leading roles who are in objectionable relationships as per the scale of society. In the story titled He Said Pani, Anandi is an old mother who survives on her own and also feeds her young indolent and drug addict son. She relieves her burden of sorrows in front of Mistri, an old carpenter who often visits her house. They both share same kind of suffrage which becomes the base of their friendship. But one day Mistri gets fainted in her verandah and asks for water. Anandi offers him pani which becomes questionable offense for police that compels the readers to think- Is it punishable to offer pani to a dying person or should let him die in pain and discomfort?

The last story unveils the pain of a woman Kusum, who had been living with a man as a strong support for him when all others have left him. She was with the man, a playwright for last thirty years but never was acknowledged other than a mistress. No one bothered to find out how they had survived before the death of the playwright. Suddenly his friend, daughter, son in law and other well-wishers emerge out to claim their love for him. They take playwright's body to cremation and arrange memorial meeting without Kusum. She accepts everything stoically. Who could she turn to, to put right this injustice? She remembers her love and compassion for the playwright when she never let the playwright know how things were bad economically. Number of times she lived without meals to arrange money for his medicines. She manages sparkling ambience of her house which was preferred by him. But her love and sacrifice were not sufficient

enough to provide her any recognition. Strict codes of society leaves her aloof at the end.

Thus Devi created a saga of stories in which the women are confronted with biased and hypocritical society that tries to crush their individuality. But these women evolve as women of mettle and face all the contradictory situations unflinchingly.

References

1. Lal Mohan .*Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Sasay to Zorgot* . New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1992.
2. Iyengar Vikram Tr.*Till Death Do Us Part- By Mahasweta Devi*. Calcutta: Seagull ,2001.
3. www.Indiawrites.org> conversation with Mahasweta Devi
4. Sen Nivedita and Nikhil Yadav.*Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology Of Recent Criticism*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008.