

FEMINISM IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S SELECTED STORIES

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is one of the India's foremost writers. She is considered as one of the boldest of Bengali female writers. Mahasweta Devi quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, yet her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work. But Mahasweta, like a subaltern, is scrupulous in her consideration towards women. In other words, she does not regard women as a separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to "the oppressions of class and caste. The woman characters in her works are stronger when compared to men. The men appear to be lacking in insight into what is happening to their being, and remain, for a moment, passive spectators as their counterparts pass through the trying situations created by an equally indifferent establishment. She stands with few equals among today's Asian writers in the dedication and directness with which she has turned writing into a form of service to the people.

Keywords: Feminism, Subjugation of Women, Passive spectators

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. Since 1980, standpoint feminists have argued that the feminist movement should address global issues such as rape, incest and prostitution. With the rise of a new wave of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists emerged.

Women have developed themselves according to the situations and have become advanced in various fields. Contemporary Indian feminists are fighting for individual autonomy, rights, freedom, independence, tolerance, co-operation, sexuality, discrimination, sexism, patriarchy, abortion, reproduction control of the female body, divorce, equal pay, maternity leave, breast feeding, prostitution and education.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the India's foremost writers. Her trenchant, powerful fiction has won her the recognition in the form of Sahitya Academy (1979), Jnanpith (1996) and Ramon Magasaysay (1996) awards, amongst several other literary honours. She was also awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her activist work among the dispossessed tribal communities.

II. FEMINISM IN DEVI'S STORIES

Her first novel, 'Nati' was published in 1957. In 1980 she started editing a Bengali quarterly, Bortika, which she turned into a forum where marginalized people who had no voice elsewhere, could write about their lives and

problems. She is considered as one of the boldest of Bengali female writers. Mahasweta Devi wrote novels and short stories based on historical subjects and also on topics of social and political relevance. She has brought out the rebellious spirit of the tortured people of the past and the present with a rare blend of fact and fiction.

Mahasweta Devi quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, yet her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work. But Mahasweta, like a subaltern, is scrupulous in her consideration towards women and documents moments of the collective struggle in which men and women join together when "their condition of work or education suffer from gender or class discrimination." (1)

In other words, she does not regard women as a separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to "the oppressions of class and caste." (2) She employs her creative energy more often that not to explore the causes for their eternal sufferings in the patriarchal society and suggests a solution which, according to her, "lies in the hands of the oppressed. When they rise, and fight back, only then history can be changed." (3)

The woman characters in her works are stronger when compared to men. The men appear to be lacking in insight into what is happening to their being, and remain, for a moment, passive spectators as their counterparts pass through the trying situations created by an equally indifferent establishment. According to Gayatri Chakraborthy Spivak, "when the subaltern 'speaks' in order to be heard and gets into the structure of

responsible resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual." (1)

Mahasweta Devi has brought her experiences of working among tribal, particularly children, in Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat and Jharkhand to her book title *The Why-Why Girl*. The author's first picture book, it tells the tale of Moyna, as Shabar tribal girl, who is unable to go to school as she has to attend to household chores. But between tending goats and collecting firewood, this little girl, with her unbridled curiosity, keeps throwing up questions about the world around her.

She is always brimming with so many 'why-whys' that she earns the sobriquet *The Why-Why Girl*. Her quest for knowledge leads her to books, which she herself learns to read and wherein she finds the answers that she seeks. Moyna thus embodies the spirit of inquiry and the close bond with nature that characterizes most tribal children and even non-tribal ones.

Draupadi is one of the most famous stories of Mahasweta Devi. It is set among the tribal in Bengal. Draupadi, or Dopdi as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel, hunted down by the government in their attempt to subjugate these groups. The government uses all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder and rape, and any tribal deaths in custody are invariably 'accidents'. But Dopdi is not easily scared. After continuous days of rape and abuse, deprived of food and water, the story ends with a magnificent final scene in which she faces her abusers, naked and bloody, but fiercely strong.

Breast Giver (Stanadayini) is the narrative of social self-indulgence and apathy. Jashoda, the protagonist after her husband is crippled, becomes a wet-nurse breast-feeding an endless stream of new-born of the rich. A surrogate mother of sorts, forced by her husband and circumstances to give birth over and over again just to keep the milk flowing, . The money she earns by continuously suckling babies at her milk-rich breasts keeps her own family well fed till the breasts give way to cancer and income dries up along with the milk. Jashoda rebels ironically, to succumb to breast cancer, alone, breast-less, with not a single surrogate "son" to light her pyre.

The Hunt is a straightforward narrative of a woman who is a victim of male sexual aggression and avenges her oppressive plight by killing her oppressor.

In *Douloti the Beautiful* one of Mahasweta Devi's most probing exposures of bond slavery in India, Douloti has to pay tough life for a loan of three hundred rupees taken by

her father, raising over forty thousand rupees for her masters by the time she dies at the age of twenty-seven.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudaali* centres on two women who develop a partnership for survival. *Rudaali* is one of the haunting stories that comes from remote villages in Rajasthan. Sanichari is a beautiful girl born in lower cast and her life is full of sufferings because of lower cast, poor finances, lost parents, drunken husband, and mischievous son. In her old age, she has become like a stone which doesn't complain and doesn't weep. Even a sharp eye drop that brings artificial tears in the eyes of a *Rudaali* cannot bring tears in her eyes.

Her mother, an old professional *Rudaali*, lives with her for couple of days but doesn't tell her that she is her mom. She suggests her to become a fellow *Rudaali* with her. But the problem is that Sanichari can't weep. When Sanichari's mom dies, she comes to know that she is her mother, Sanichari's tears come back to her eyes after long years and she becomes a famous *Rudaali* taking over her mother's profession.

Though Sanichari's life is hard, she is she stoic and strong woman. After the death of her dissolute husband Sanichari survived as best she can. *Rudaali* relates Sanichari's story to us in flashbacks as she reflects on her past with her friend, the experienced *Rudaali*, Bikhni whose mantle as a *Rudaali* she would inherit. We see the aging but proud woman's every effort at surviving in this male dominated world.

Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times is a touching told in first person of a woman Bedanabala, whose mother used to live in a brothel. These reminiscences are sometimes personal, sometimes historical. *Bedanabala*, written in 1996, seeks to empathize with a segment of society condemned even by other woman as beyond the bounds of decency and social acceptance.

The story begins in the late 19th Century, with the "theft" of a beautiful girl child from a wealthy family. She is Bedanabala's mother. She grows up in the house of ill repute, to be groomed to enter the profession once she has come of age. But then, Did'ma, the owner of the brothel, grows to love this beautiful child as she would her own daughter and does not want her to enter this profession. She seeks for her a life of a householder. It is story that is seldom told. Did'ma's contribution to the war effort, her donations to the fighters of India's freedom and her gifts to the mission are her way of atoning for her sins. The story is set in a changing India, our India poised on the threshold of progress of and transformation. New

thoughts and ideas are forming in the minds of idealistic youth and nationalistic passion runs high.

Many of Mahasweta Devi's stories are about tribal fighting oppression, resisting exploitation, rebelling against authority. Such stories have, may agree, an immediacy and commitment that is not often found, including amongst tribal writers themselves. The author of celebrated works like "Hajar Churashir Maa" and Aranyer Adhikar' has taken up the cause of the Purulia dancing girls, saying trading them was an illogical outcome of the tradition of tribal folklore.

Comparing these girls to the Devdasis or temple dancers of South India, Mahasweta Devi said, 'In the heart of West Bengal, a Left Front-ruled state for 30 years, this cruel practice of purchasing a young girl, making her sing and dance to please her male clients, taking all her money treating her like a pariah goes on and on.' She said their buyers make them dance at public functions to augment their income but do not provide basic amenities to their children born out of wedlock, ostracize them and dump their bodies as garbage, 'depriving them even a dignified funeral' health, education, equality and dignity in life and death.

With the example of Giribala, she is asking all women to break free of the patriarchal chains in their lives and to move towards physical, intellectual and spiritual liberation. Giribala is very carefully researched and unique work of Mahasweta Devi. For this very reason, the story of Giribala provides a strong contribution to the field of rhetoric. It is an example of what human beings can do when pushed to the limit, when pushed beyond endurance. Certainly a simple story such as Giribala can help hundreds or thousands of women of any country to claim agency, to gain control over themselves and their lives. It is about education and consciousness-raising, the process of breaking free of the imposition of men's ideology on women and about engaging in acts of glorious self-determination.

III. CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi said that she is not a feminist but strongly believes that half of humanity – namely, women – is suffering because of their physicality. 'Unless we give dignity to that, nothing will change,' she said. Not only does Mahasweta Devi expose the extreme oppression of women in rural India, but she shows all Indian women the way out.

She is certainly, as a noted critic puts it, "one the most important writers writing in India today." It is effusive praise and yet more can be said of Mahasweta Devi. She stands with few equals among today's Asian writers in the dedication and directness with which she has turned writing into a form of service to the people.

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