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Research Article



The Dual Legacy: Mahasweta Devi as a Reformer and Revolutionary

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Abstract

This article presents an in-depth exploration of Mahasweta Devi's multifaceted persona— a celebrated author, social activist, and a prominent figure in the realm of socio-political reforms in India. She is known for her rich literary contributions. Her works primarily emphasized the

plight and the struggles of the marginalized sections of the society, often acting as a bridge between them and the wider world. For Mahasweta Devi the creation of literature is a solemn and responsible vocation. She uses her art as a weapon to fight against the socio-economic injustice meted out to the marginalized in Indian society. Literature is intrinsic to her advocacy for social justice, establishing Devi as a thoughtful, committed reformer and revolutionary. Her writings are imbued with calls for change and revolution, exhibiting her profound abilities as a writer equipped with a reformist vision and revolutionary determination. Devi is not merely a writer, but a crusader with a mission— a social commitment to the upliftment of tribal communities. Her narratives hold significant social relevance, pushing the contours of contemporary Indian literature with their often radical and provocative themes. Yet, Devi's influence transcends her literary contributions, reflecting her intense passion as a reformer and revolutionary. Her untiring activism targeted the systemic oppressions entrenched in the Indian society, particularly towards tribals and Dalits. She exposed the blatant violation of human rights, often confronting the authorities, embodying the spirit of a revolutionary. Drawing a trajectory of her influence, the article suggests that Devi's radicalism, uncompromising in its advocacy for the dispossessed, established her as a reformer, pushing for change at both grassroots and policy levels. Her relentless pursuit for social justice and equality, while shedding light on how her literary works served as tools of resistance and activism. Drawing upon various examples from her seminal works like *Draupadi*, *Rudali*, and *Mother of 1084*, it unravels how her narratives portrayed the unvarnished reality of the oppressed, compelling her readers to confront uncomfortable truths. The article also examines her influence on various contemporary movements and how her ideologies continue to inspire activists and reformers today. It highlights the life and works of Mahasweta Devi, not only as a celebrated author, but also as a fearless reformer and revolutionary activist whose enduring legacy continues to inspire generations of activists and writers in their fight against social injustices.

Keywords: Tribal communities, Marginalized community, Environmental crisis, Oppression, Reform, Social activism, Naxalism, Socio-political change

Mahasweta Devi has made it clear several times that she does not write just for the recreational entertainment of the reader; that she is a votary of the 'art for life's sake' school of thought; that literature is for her a medium of bringing out social vices, injustice, discrimination and corruption rampant in the society. She is a champion of the cause of the tribals, the weak, and the downtrodden. Through her writings she wants to bring out a revolution in society so that the destitute, the oppressed, the exploited may take breath in open air and not feel ashamed of their existence on this earth. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha*, a collection of politically charged narrative, Mahasweta Devi assertively declares, "Life is not mathematics and the human being is not mad for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics" (8).

Mahasweta Devi worked for the upliftment of the tribals, women folks, farm workers, labourers and the oppressed relentlessly all her life. She was an activist who dedicated her life

for the cause of the tribals and the dalits. She had a strong desire to free the low caste people, especially the women from the clutches of the powerful and rich upper-class people and also the greedy and repressive government officials. Through her powerful writings and activism, she gained the reputation of a bold and defiant woman. In her writings, both fiction and non-fiction, she has repeatedly expressed her concern for the plight of the tribals who in the name of development have been harassed for long' they have been evicted from their natural dwelling, forests and hills and caves. Her stories and essays expose the hollowness of the government's claim of progress and development by highlighting the fact that government policies have done more harm than good to the tribals and local natives.

Mahasweta Devi's commitment and dedication to the cause of reform in the lives of the exploited and the oppressed can be seen in the fact that she boldly expressed her sympathies for the Naxal Movement when the government was repressing the movement with all its might. Thousands of bright young boys and girls were killed in the suspicion of having a link with the Naxals. At this time, Devi brought out work *Mother of 1084*. In this novel, the character named Sujata expresses her sympathies for Brati and his friends who were shot dead by the police. She also shows hatred for characters like Dibyanath who remain indifferent to this cruelty lest their good name should invite any blot of having connection with insurgents. In this novel, Devi emphatically says that there is great need to change the corrupt social and political system against which the youth were fighting. This novel may not be very high on scale measuring the artistic aspects of the novel such as its art of plot construction, characterization, style and language; but the its subject matter and the message conveyed by its narrative are quite meaningful and significant in regard to the stark social realities prevailing on ground in our country. In her vision and approach delineated in *Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta Devi comes out as a big-hearted social activist, reformer and revolutionary.

Draupadi is a fine story by Mahasweta Devi. It was also written in the backdrop of the Naxal Movement. Draupadi is a young tribal woman with an attractive body. She is a member of the Naxal Movement. In her attempt to save her colleagues from falling into the trap laid by the police she is caught in the jungle by the paramilitary forces. She is brutally raped by several men who hurl torture and violence upon her body. Her nipples are severed from her breasts and her genitals are badly injured but she remains bold and firm; in the morning she appears before the Senanayak in the naked form challenging men's masculinity. Mahasweta Devi is vociferous in bringing out the inhumanity of the paramilitary force. Having lived and worked with the poorest of the poor and the tribal people, she has the first-hand knowledge of the miserable life and pathetic living conditions of the marginals and the tribals living in the regions of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. She has the experience of the life in the slum areas where the downtrodden and the destitute reside. She is trenchant in her criticism of the dismal approach of the government in dealing with local issues concerning the poor and disadvantaged people. She describes in her works all sorts of violence, atrocity and injustice inflicted upon the men and women belonging to these impoverished sections of our society. We get to read that in most of the cases, it is the women folks who bear the brunt of suffering and exploitation by the rich and the powerful feudal lords. They are made concubines or they are raped as long as they are

capable of being object of sexual pleasure. They are squeezed and left dried when they become used and unattractive. They are turned out from the zamindar's and sahuks' 'harem' to be yoked in the field work. They become beggars, professional weepers or prostitutes. On the other hand, in most of the cases, the men of the community are made bonded labours. They are thrashed for the slightest mistake or negligence. In some cases, a young healthy man is also used as a stud, i.e., the young mistress of the house uses him for the gratification of her sexual desires. Mahasweta Devi's writings are replete with depictions of such human predicaments.

This is not a great work from the artist's point of view as the reader develops boredom reading about rape and exploitation. Often, such kind of writing has invited the charge of flatness and monotonous style of writing against Mahasweta Devi. She also does not deny the charges nor does she take a different stand. She says that her aim is not to gain limelight. She can't produce false romantic stories, when there are hunger, starvation and exploitation all around. Spivak, the noted scholar and translator of Mahasweta Devi, has also written, "As a tribal, Dandi is not romanticized" (11). She can't turn a blind eye to the harsh realities prevailing in society. Let the critics say whatsoever they want. Her view is that "a responsible writer, standing at the turning point in history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited." (Devi 1997 Vol. VIII). As a result of this belief, she as a writer wishes to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies. The feudal minded landowners combined with the so-called religious heads of the administrative system are out for the blood of the lower caste people. Blood. . . peel the mask off the face of India which is projected by the government to expose its naked brutality, savagery, caste and class exploitation, and place this India, a hydra headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions. (Devi, 2009 IX-X)

Outcast (2002) is the collection of four stories which deal with four characters Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta, who hail from the most oppressed and marginalized segment of society. It is shown how they become the victims of unending class, caste and gender exploitation that prevails in post-independent India. With their victimization and the relentless struggle for survival, they force their society to rethink their societal norms. Mahasweta Devi is highly critical of the societal norms that make them helpless, exploit them and at last, brand them sinners. The people, who entice them with false promises, enjoy them to their content and at last throw them away, remain respectful individuals in the society. The agents who sell the poor women to the landlords and the pimps who involve in the racket of flesh trade are left scot-free. The hypocrisies, dual standards, and the arrogance of the privileged class is thus exposed thoroughly by Devi in her works. 'Dhouli' is a touching story of a young untouchable woman named Dhouli who finds herself an outcast in her own community, in the village Tahad. The saga of unending caste and gender exploitation makes her life miserable and a relentless struggle for survival. Dhouli, a widow, leaves her in-laws to escape from the eyes of her husband's elder brother and joins her mother at Tahad. She is beautiful and attractive but has not encouraged any of the young dusad men. She is made to observe all the taboos of the widowhood. The life continues struggling with poverty and hunger. Misrilal, a Brahmin boy falls in love with her. She has taken utmost care to guard herself, for she knows what has happened to Jhalo and Shanichari. In the course of time, all her caution is swept away in a flood

of passion and as a result Misrilal impregnates her and her long ordeal with trial, suffering, humiliation and violence begins. The postscript of this story collection reads: "Mahasweta Devi's acute and perceptive pen brings to life with a deep empathy and sensitivity which makes these women step out of the margins of society to live in our minds, impressive in their quiet courage and tenacity, their will to survive" (42).

Bitter Soil (1998) is the collection that includes four stories namely 'Little Ones', 'Seeds', 'The Witch' and 'Salt'. They reflect on the contemporary realities of the Indian society. As Mahasweta Devi herself admits, her reputation as a writer stands largely on some of her works of which the four stories in this collection form a major part. Set in Palamau district of Bihar State (now Jharkhand), these stories draw our attention towards the prevailing caste and class exploitation which according to Mahasweta Devi is rooted in our land system. What is true of Palamau is true of India. She says, "Palamau is a mirror of India." (7) The failure of the successive Governments since independence to redistribute rural and urban land above the land ceiling to the landless has contributed to the continuation of the feudal system. It has led to the exploitation and oppression of the poor and the marginalized. This is really a blot on the Independent India. Mahasweta Devi writes these stories with a sole purpose of sensitizing the people towards the state of affair and also to make them feel ashamed of the true face of India. Hence, she uses the language here which is brutal and lethal at time,

'Little Ones' is one of the serious stories of Mahasweta Devi. She says that this story was born of her tribal experience (9). Set in Palamau, it expresses the savage anger of the tribals, Aagarias at the system which forces them to starve, whereas allows some people to eat three meals a day. She found her idea expressed in this story being corroborated by the founder of the Nutrition Institute of Brazil, D. Castro in his book *The Geography of Hunger*, published in 1952. It was said that the chronic malnutrition hinders the growth of human and animal bodies. Even the dwarf horses grow big and strong if provided with nutritious fodder. The little ones we find in the story have been reduced to that distorted human shape due to the lack of nutritious food.

Mahasweta Devi has good knowledge of how life is lived at the ground level. She convincingly tries to portray the life of the subalterns, the marginalized and the downtrodden with utmost accuracy, bluntly bringing out the mechanics of exploitation and operation by powerful section of society who has always been in league with the political leaders and the police. All these forces together deprive them of every resource which are originally meant for their welfare. Through her writings, Devi wants to reach out to as many people as she can, to make them aware of the bitter reality of life lived by the marginalized sections in our society in the hope that people may rise up in support of the marginalized and all may share the benefit of freedom and development.

For Mahasweta Devi the creation of literature is a solemn and responsible vocation. She uses her art as a weapon to fight against the socio-economic injustice meted out to the deprived sections. She takes literature as integral to the cause of social protest. While showing her boundless love for man, she wages a war against inhumanity. She is uncompromising and reacts sharply against status quo and detests all that is anti-marginal. The virulent attack on the

leisured class ruling the root in social structures find a candid expression in her works. She questions with raised fingers the cruelties hurled upon the marginal by the powerful dominant classes. Fight against exploitation the poor Adivasi men and women remains the main and the recurrent theme of her work and the motive force of her life. In chronicling the subjugation and repression inflicted upon her characters, the author persistently emphasizes their resistance, implicating the oppressors' culpability. Her oeuvre serves as an exploration of defiance, illustrating the oppressed maintaining dignity despite harsh adversity. These previously silenced individuals are endowed with an impactful voice of dissent. Despite material deprivation, they possess substantial courage and resolve. Her story's protagonists eschew docility and humility, engaging in resistance despite their apparent helplessness against overwhelming adversities. She propounds the belief that vocal assertion is necessary for recognition; a sustained silence is an unaffordable luxury.

Mahasweta Devi was so much obsessed with the idea of bringing a reform in the life of the tribals that she converted some of her stories into plays thinking that plays have strong appeal to the people and they influence people more than the printed stories. Devi does not stop here. She sacrificed her job and entered the field of journalism to give voice to the issues and concerns of the tribal population. She did all this for the sake of her mission of understanding and uncovering the problems and challenges faced by the tribal people, and then doing something to bring them out from the ghettos in which they have been living for so long.

Mahasweta Devi therefore comes out as a serious and conscientious thinker, reformer and revolutionary. Her writings give the message of reform and revolution. She is a great writer with a reformist mindset and revolutionary zeal. She is a writer with a mission, a social purpose to uplift the tribals. Her works have a great social relevance. India still lives behind a curtain of darkness which separates the main stream society from the poor and the destitute. In portraying the mass humanity in her novels, stories, plays and essays Mahasweta Devi does her bit in tearing of this curtain of darkness.

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