

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

Social Consciousness in the Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.1.16

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, a well-known name in the scenario of Indian English literature, a political and social activist worked with and for tribal and marginalized communities of eastern India throughout her life. The social conscious or aware of the problems within the society or community compels Devi to writes and protests actively against social injustice. She wants to see the change in the society, therefore takes an active role to eradicate poverty, injustice, exploitation of the subaltern. Her commitment towards the society as reflected the story 'Little Ones', 'Fisherman', 'Hunt', has been highlighted in the paper.

Keywords- Social Consciousness, Subaltern, Exploitation, Poverty

Mahasweta Devi is one of them who wrote out of the central human predicament. The social conscious or aware of the problems within the society or community compels Devi to writes and protests actively against social injustice. She wants to see the change in the society, therefore takes an active role to eradicate poverty, injustice, exploitation of the subaltern. The unflinching enthusiasm, passion and conviction to remove all the ill from the society make her extremely sensitive towards her surroundings. Therefore her entire literary corpus realistically depicts the untold agonies of the subaltern and the frustration, humiliation, suppression, anguish felt by the marginalized sections of the society. Mahasweta Devi thinks that a responsible writer should write and takes a stand in defence of the exploited. She says;

So the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: The feudal-minded landowner, his henchmen, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood... Bait (ix)

Mahasweta Devi, a well-known name at the scenario of Indian English literature, a political and social activist worked with and for tribal and marginalized communities of eastern India throughout her life. Though she originally wrote in Bangla yet the translation of her literary output in English led her fame beyond the boundaries of her state and even country. She wrote a number collections of short stories entitled *Breast Stories*, *Bitter Soil*, *Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories*, *Old Women*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Outcaste- four Stories*, *Bait*, *In*

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the Name of the Mother, After Kurukshetra etc. All her short stories are in unequivocal terms, a crusade against social-exploitation. She always writes for the essential dignity of man, highlights her socio-cultural and political concerns. She had more than hundred fiction titles to her names such as *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956), *Titu Mir* (2000), *Mother of 1084* (1974) and *ChottiMunda and his Arrow* (1930). Besides her fame as a playwright rests on the play like *Mother of 1080, Water, Aajir, Bayen and Urvashi and Johnny*. Mahasweta Devi has made an important contribution to literary and cultural studies in India. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities was a first of its kind. Her powerful haunting stories of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of the subaltern and feminist discourse by leading scholars.

Mahasweta Devi, being a socially committed writer presents bare facts of the poor and labourers. The writer, an acute observer of society, is aware of every stratum of society. Mahasweta Devi projects the subaltern because they belong to certain castes and don't have a good fortune. She also brings into light that the society is divided among different caste and class, where the rich exercise their power on the poor. The tribals of India, who have been living in India since ancient time, are also a prime concern of Devi's literary output. She minutely observes the condition of the poor tribals as well as the selfish means of exploiting agencies. In her one of the stories *Little Ones*, Mahasweta Devidepicts exploitation of poor villagers and resistance of the exploited ones. The story set in Lohri, a terrible place, situated at the meeting point of the boundaries of three districts, Rachi, Sargiya and Palamau, affected by drought and famine. The relief officer, an honest and sympathetic person, who supposed to distribute relief material, has been briefed by B.D.O. about the unproductivity of famine-affected area before visiting the place. The Relief Officer, representing the mainstream society, is completely oblivion of the pitiable condition of the tribal people. Through the story, Mahasweta Devi is making her readers aware of the pitiable condition of the tribal communities. Like the mainstream people, the relief officer comes to Lohri with the impression that adivasi men and women may dance and sing their regional songs but stunned to the seepitiable condition of the poor tribals. Their songs do not have a melody but it seems that as if they mourn their death "these songs are dirges"

The incidents which are projected by Mahasweta Devi in this short story are derived from his own experiences because she spent time with tribal people in their villages. She believes that these people don't need any help from outside but they extremely comfortable in their natural surroundings, what they need is trust, love and peace. But they are disturbed and exploited by the outsiders who come to take advantage of them. In the story 'Little Ones', The beautiful natural surroundings of adivasi have been snatched away by the government in order to build factories and mines in addition to that, to make their life more miserable, punitive taxes were imposed on all other Aagariya village. They make futile attempts to resist against police, who burnt their Kubha village into ashes and left them at the mercy of the

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giver of subsistence. Mahasweta Devi unfurls the complacent outlook of the police who use their power and position to suppress these voiceless, dispossessed communities. In the story, the police sprinkled salt on the earth to make their land barren so that nothing will grow in their land. She unveils the corrupt practices of the system who are at the side of the powerful and don't hesitate in making the life of these dispossessed even more pathetic. Mahasweta Devi is completely aware of the strong association of tribal people with nature. She makes her reader aware about the selfish means of exploiters which she highlighted through her story.

Mahasweta Devi contemplates on the present social situation, where she wants to narrate through her story 'Little Ones' that after so many years of independence, no sufficient help has reached to these tribal people. The poor, homeless Aagariya are left to wander here and there in the forest in search of food. These poor tribal people turned into pigmy size due to age long starvation. Devi narrates "the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization". These children actually are not children but an adult who are stealing the relief material from the camp at night to keep their body and soul together. The writer through this narrative tries to share with readers the worst face of Indian tribal, who have been living since ancient India yet mainstream India continually refused to recognize them. The writer shows the helplessness and agony of these poor tribal people are revealed through these lines:

Just fourteen of us left, now, the rest are dead. Our bodies have shrivelled and shrunk from lack of food. The men can only piss, they can't get it up any more. Women can't bear children. So we steal relief. We must eat and grow again. Mustn't we? (Little Ones 19)

Mahasweta Devi depicts the pitiable condition of this section of society due to extreme poverty and negligence of the government. These people are outcaste by mainstream society and some steps should be taken to improve their condition. Devi says "I have not written these stories to please my readers. If they get under the skin of these stories and feel as the writer feels, that will be rewarded enough."

The other social problem that has been highlighted by Mahasweta Devi is Naxalism. Mahasweta Devi, a sensitive writer, is highly shaken by the uprising of Naxalite movement that took place in the 1960s and 1970s in West Bengal. Being a journalist, Mahasweta Devi, records and observes the minutest detail of social evils that took place in society. She presents the nexus of politicians and administration that are making a tactful plan to destroy the emerging Naxalite movement. They try to curb this insurgency by taking the help of underworld. The similar scene has been portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in her short stories 'Fisherman'. The story 'Fisherman' is linked with the Naxalite movement that occurred in West Bengal. The protagonist, Jagat, simple and ignorant fellow, extremely in need of money for his son's education, who had no fish to the net, is proved useful for police in retrieving

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bodies from Raypukur tank. He is ignorant of the fact that why the young men drown in the tank in such a large number. These young men are killed by police whom the police suspected to be Naxalites are killed in a suspicious manner. Mahasweta Devi ironically says that the police treated the Naxalitemore "more dangerous than a tiger in the forest, more deadly than snakes in their holes."

Devi captures the social scene, the police-criminal-politician nexus that prevailed during the 1960s and 1970s in Bengal. Mahasweta Devi reflects on the Naxalite movement and the Anti-Naxalite offensive by the police which was rather Machiavellian. The police without any fear use underworld criminals to curb the Naxalite movement who kill the young men in suspicion later on dump their bodies in the tank in some distant place that would be added to the list of unaccounted murder. Sumanta Banerjee in her "Translators Notes" in the short story Collection *Bait* says

...the 1960s and 1970s when the ruling politician and the administration sought the help of the underworld to destroy the Naxalite movement and eliminate its peasant and student cadres who posed an armed challenge to the establishment with their programme of putting an end to feudal and capitalist oppression..... (Bait xii)

Mahasweta Devi raises her voice to this social problem where the young future of the nation is being killed without any substantial proof by police. The police show apathetic outlook towards this situation doesn't take any action in contrary killing young men, later on, drown them in a tank as unaccounted murder.

Devi brings into a light pitiable social situation that causes havoc in Bengal when the police launched the direct onslaught by recruiting local young hitmen to finish off the Naxalites in their respective localities. The writes narrate through the story 'Fisherman' that the police used to manipulate to underworld criminal gangs or eliminates them according to the political situation and other socio-political trends of the time. Devi highlights apathetic outlook the whole administration system where no official is paying any attention to the young death of the poor families. Jagat interrogates to Daroga about her son at the police station. Daroga replies "Now go, Jagat! Stop whining." Jagat, a helpless and broken father, who has no access to any authority, sadly replies "My son's dead no one left after me don't I have the right to whine? By portraying all this, Devi wants narrates the agonies of these helpless, voiceless, poor people, whose lives, dreams, happiness have no value.

Yet another important social issue is the ecological devastation of the tribal resources has been dealt with brilliantly by Mahasweta Devi in her short story *Hunt*. The story set in Kuruda, connected by the railway line, where the train only slows down at this station, only to stop at Tohri which is the busiest station in the area. Kuroda has been abandoned, unlike Tohri which is a coal mining halt. Kuroda's forest resources have been recognized only when Tahsildar pounce on the valuable resources of this area. Mahasweta Devi brings into light the very important social issues of the ecological devastation of the tribal resources. The real

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resources for these indigenous people are land, forest, river water and other natural resources that have been slowly snatched away by the so-called civilized people in the name of national interest. These marginalized people are attached to these resources which serve as a livelihood for the indigenous communities. These people are snatching away these natural resources from these tribal people. The story 'Little Ones' also highlights the way of living of tribal people and focuses on the dependency of tribal people on natural resources. These unlettered communities find their sources of strength from nature. These indigenous people are living secluded in the lap of nature and are extremely shy of the urban populace. Their lives are dependent on forest and agriculture and their religion is characterized by paganism and animalism.

Mahasweta Devi also brings into light the social issue of gender inequality and oppression. Her narratives articulate the aspects of gender inequality, sexual exploitation, the doubly marginalized status of women and violence that tribal women face, both with their own community as in their interface with the mainstream group in India. Mary Oran's vulnerability on account of being a woman is starkly evident. Being a tribal woman she is doubly marginalized and liable to be exploited just as her mother was many years ago by her white employer. Bhikni, Mary's mother had been a victim of the white male colonizer who has exploited her physically and sexually. Like Bikini, she narrates the position of women as victims of the cruellest violence and exploitation of tribal communities.

Mahasweta Devi's brings out the major social concern of the era, the struggle that women of tribal communities face in post-colonial India. As most of the heroine of Mahasweta Devi's fiction narratives; Mary too takes on the role of the aggressor, fights back and kills her potential rapist. This killing of Tahsildar by Mary can also be translated into a means of expressing revolt and resistance against oppression. Through this gendered subject belonging to a section of society that is discriminated against is poor and backward and has no access to education.

Mahasweta Devi brings into light the resistance to the exploitation that is essential and is possible as well. Mary Oran becomes the vehicle for the resistance and revolt and the hunting festival which is a festival of justice too becomes her weapon. She hunts down and kills the tahsildar who is her aggressor as well as a threat to the land and its people as well.

Mahasweta Devi evokes our conscious leaves behind the serious question to be resolved. The short stories represent a profound concern for human predicament and sincere hope for a better future of mankind. Mahasweta Devi herself acknowledges the crucial role of artist play in social wellbeing with the objective to transform the existing social system.

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