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Concern for Human Rights Violation: A Study of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

In the literary landscape, Mahasweta Devi stands out as an illustrious writer who, with precision and visceral detail, traces the saga of tribulations and societal marginalization experienced by tribal communities. Upon a comprehensive reading of Devi's body of work, an observer might be inclined to conceive of her as a metaphorical celestial emissary, descended upon the terrestrial plane with the sole purpose of assuaging the sorrows of the voiceless; those who, being bound by their fear, were rendered unable to raise their voices against the oppressive landlords and zamindars. Devi, in her profound humanity, contemplates deeply on

the circumstances of the impoverished dalits and tribals, who were deprived of basic human rights. The balance of power was tipped in favor of the affluent and zamindars, thereby allowing the latter to exploit the disenfranchised at their discretion. The tribal and dalit communities were victims of both physical and sexual harassment, and they were effectively silenced, stripped of their right to protest their own subjugation and oppression. In the context of the societal framework, these communities were marginalised, excluded from the mainstream discourse of life. Devi, with her empathy and indignation, assumed the role of their voice, tirelessly advocating for their plight. She strived to disseminate information about their gruesome conditions through her research papers and books, which subsequently evolved into a form of literature that voiced the experiences of these communities. During her era, the governmental structure was steeply biased against the indigent. Their interests and welfare were disregarded, and policies largely favored the prosperous. Devi's work serves as a critique of this system, shedding light on the grim reality of social stratification and advocating for an inclusive society that upholds the dignity and rights of every individual. The present research article draws vivid details of the sufferings and marginalization of the tribals as represented by Mahasweta Devi in her works.

Keywords: Malpractice, Injustice, Suppressed class, Oppression, Subaltern, Sensibility, Social Marginalization, Adivasis

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, a versatile genius, thinks about the malpractice of the government against injustice towards these poor people even when the government of India claims of being a democratic country. She does not like the policies of the government of independent India which maintains the old beliefs and old poisoned system based on caste, creed and untouchability. After noticing all these rotten systems, she feels pained and in an introduction to *Bitter Soil*, she asserts: "For the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression" (*Bitter Soil*, viii).

Mahasweta Devi has drawn a picture of post – colonial era during this period when the subaltern was alienated from the mainstream. They faced suppression and oppression and nothing else. The sole aim of Devi is to bring the marginalized back to the mainstream and raise voice to give them basic human rights from which they were kept away for long. Devi became the spokesperson of those Adivasis, Dalits and down trodden who are uneducated and remain busy in the service of money lenders and zamindars. Her main motto is to help them in availing all the basic needs that are essential for living a respectable life. In her Introduction to *Five Plays*; she has expressed her goal in the following words:

For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire the transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics. I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labor. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints is the only source of inspiration

in all my writings. All the parties to the Left as well as Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my life time any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence, I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame. For a writer faces judgment in her lifetime and remains answerable. (x-xi)

Devi, as a professional writer, has gained a rich experience of Adivasis and Dalits because she visited them and lived among them; then she could understand the real picture of these people. She could make herself aware regarding their bonded labour, suppression and oppression and found this very painful in the core of her heart and became restless. Nearly all her fictional or non – fictional works are filled with the pains and sufferings of Adivasis and Dalits who were silent even after bearing all the tortures of moneylenders and did not speak a single word against them. Her work *Titu Mir* has drawn the picture of Bengal of 1770 when the state suffered a lot due to famine and havoc. It was a natural phenomenon that caused the low caste, low class and the natives to die like flies. Due to the famine, no crops were grown and the zamindars or sahib who had stored the rice in the silos, sold it at exorbitant prices. People would eat leaves of trees, roots and barks. These poor had no money to buy rice to feed them and their families. This was a great famine which had disturbed the life of the poor, Dalits and Adivasis. Regarding this famine, P. Sainath in his book *Everybody loves a God Drought* expresses his views about rural poverty and victims in the country in the following words:

Drought is, beyond question, among the more serious problems this country faces. Drought relief almost equally beyond question is rural India's biggest growth industry. Often there is little relation between the two. Relief can go to regions that get lots of rainfall. Even where it goes to scarcity areas, those most in need seldom benefit from it. (*Everybody loves a Drought* 317)

Mahasweta Devi, the voice of the oppressed class of Adivasis, collects the data of those people who are not in the government benefits list due to drought. She calls these poor people helpless and gives them the name 'poverty'. All her works are related to the oppression and depression of the poor people whose voice was silent and the writers who were writing at that time did not pay attention towards these downtrodden people.

Devi's famous work *Douloti* is set in the least developed district Palamau in the state of Bihar of India. This district is much famous for rich mineral resources and dense forestry. This district is also famous for practicing bonded labour system like other states- Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujrat and Madhya Pradesh of India. This is the system under which a person works under some rich man but he himself does not have power to work by his own will. When a loan is taken by bonded labourer, the whole family of the bonded labourer is supposed to work under the landlord so long as the loan is not repaid. The landlord never wishes that the loan taken by the bonded labourer should be repaid and the amount given as loan is automatically multiplied. The system is practiced by the landlords. Devi says, "Anyone who thinks that the zamindari system has been abolished should visit Palamau" (P 14).

Devi's famous novella *Douloti* has a deep concern and care for the tribal people who were from the helpless and much exploited community. She has not only depicted the depressed class of Adivasi men but also women who were prey to this kind of exploitation. The women of these poor helpless Adivasis were not free from debt taken by their husbands and parents and under such condition they were to work at the homes of landlords and zamindars to repay the debt which could never be repaid due to heavy interest taken by the landlords in lieu of the money given to these poor creatures. Devi writes about the exploitation of women especially the tribal women. The fine example of women exploitation that Devi tells is that of a woman named Ganori Nagesia. The tribal man, in *Douloti* borrows three hundred rupees from Munabar Singh Chandela, a landlord of his time, for several reasons. After sometime he was sent to jail on the charge of stealing water buffaloes from the market. There was a tradition that existed in the then set up of the society of feeding the people of their community after getting released from the jail as the symbol of purification. "If you go to jail and stay in there, you have to feed your community when you return. This is such a rule that you can't get around" (21).

From the history of *Douloti*, we learn that women in the name of marriage are harassed and exploited. Man and woman both have the basic human right to live a respectable life and no one should be exploited in the name of caste, creed and colour, even more on the basis of gender identity, but the deplorable reality is that nothing like this has happened. The person whom Permanand takes inside the room of Douloti is sex hungry and who takes aswagandha root at night to keep his virility spirited. His hunger for sex knows no bound. Douloti is bloodied many times all through the night. Finally, her sobbing and entreaties could no longer be heard. But the "grunt of a routing pig could be heard" (P 58).

Permanand is a man of different nature, who is a fraud and whom Devi gives the name of Samkat Narayana who comes at Ganori house to make him free from bonded labour and takes Douloti, his daughter from the village with a promise of marriage with him, but he does not keep his promise and instead of marriage, he offers Douloti to Lalita Sahib. Permanand earns money by supplying the girls at the brothel house. He does not give any money to these girls for their clothing, cosmetics or medicine but earns a lot of money that comes out of selling them to the needy persons. He exploits the girls for his own purpose and selfish ends. Douloti is tortured too much when she does not permit the man for sex with her again and again. But she is helpless because she is under the debt of Permanand of three hundred rupees but by the offering of Douloti, Lalita has given Permanand one and a half thousand rupees in six months, which is five times her original loan.

Douloti lay down near Permanand's feet. God! Your three hundred rupees have come through five times. Set me free then? Permanand had laughed. He had said, yes, yes you've seen the principal. But interest? I bought your clothes, those fifty-two rupees? My body is compassionate. Your money had not increased by interest to two and a half thousand. And all my accounts are written down. When it's

repaid in principals and interest, you will be freed. (P 76)

Mahasweta Devi's concern for human rights violation is not limited to Douloti only but it goes on in her next work "Draupadi" which appeared in *Agnigarbh* (womb of fire) which expresses how the people sitting in political power, the upper caste people and those in the mainstream exploit those who are deprived or marginalized for some reasons. These people suppress and oppress the poor and unprivileged class as Devi observes: "Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics" ("Draupadi" 4)

The story "Draupadi" narrates that sexual violence is the easiest means employed by the powerful adversaries to demoralize women's efforts in political spheres. The novella narrates how the basic rights of living of the Adivasi and Dalits were violated at every step. These people have no respectable life and are humiliated at every walk of life. Mahasweta Devi has fought against the violation of human rights Her plays *Water*, *Aajir*, and *Bayen* published in the collection *The Five Plays* address the issue of exploitation and marginalization that are considered with the socio-historical process embedded in social and cultural practices. The structure of oppression is interlocked and deep rooted based on class, caste and gender. All the characters of Devi fight against the inhuman activities done to them.

For maintaining the basic rights of the human beings, Mahasweta Devi comes very close to Mulk Raj Anand who has also been the champion of the cause of lower caste people. He fought against untouchability and called it a barrier in the progress of mankind. Ravindra Nath Tagore is also supposed to be the pioneer of the basic human rights of mankind. In his famous play *Chandalika*, the same sentiments are expressed by the mother of the heroine Prakriti, a Chandalini, when she advises her daughter:

The filth into which an evil fate has cast you in a wall of mud that no spade in the world can break through. You are unclean; beware of tainting the outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your place, narrow as it is. To stray anywhere beyond its limits is to trespass....

You were born a slave. It is the net of destiny, who can undo it? (150 – 152)

Human rights violation is a sin that is the basic voice of Mahasweta Devi. Her feelings and sympathy have been with the poor and oppressed who are not powerful enough to take their rights by force. These are the poor and helpless who are tortured and their wives and children are also in the same condition. The fine expression of physical exploitation of women can be seen in "Shikar" or "The Hunt" which depicts the story of Mary Oraon, a tribal girl who with her great courage kills a non-tribal contractor when he tries to keep her in his grip. This story takes place at Kuruda in Dalotganj in the state of Bihar. This contractor insults Mary Oraon again and again but on the day of the tribal women hunting festival of Bihar once in twelve years, the tehsildar or contractor desires to hurt their feeling of self-respect. When he cannot fulfill his desire, he orders to cut the forest. This inhuman behavior is unbearable for these people known as Adivasis. These people have no right to educate themselves. They have to work continuously under

their masters.

From the day she became a professional writer, her main motto was to bring into light how the people away from the mainstream, were exploited and suppressed. Basic human rights prepare the path of mankind to lead a smooth life and when in society a man or woman leads life without rights, his/her life becomes monotonous automatically. Devi has seen the society of rich persons who keep bonded labourers by giving a meager amount of money as loan on interest to the poor and helpless persons and in turn of this amount, these people and their children work as bonded labourers. Where there is no leisure to think freely, to act freely, everything, every action of these people depends upon the will of their masters. Women are physically abused without their consent, as their consent is of no meaning and the will of their master is supreme. Sometimes these women are forced to go to the brothel to quench the thirst of public to earn money. This type of woeful condition prevailed in the society. The reason is clear that is the gap between rich and poor, high and low, literate and illiterate, privileged and unprivileged class. This type of exploitation existed in the past and today also it is rampant, that was observed by Mahasweta Devi, and she protested against the human rights violation. Devi dreams to have a society which is free from malice and ill – will, where a man is respected as man and is treated not as an animal, woman is respected as woman and is not considered as a thing or commodity. She curses a society in which man or woman's rights are violated and no one is allowed to work freely, especially those who come from lower level, lower strata, lower castes, lower living standard, of the society where man and woman are sold and bonded labour system exists, patriarchal system and other kind of evils which cause human rights violation. She has raised a voice forcefully against these evils.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it can be said here that Mahasweta Devi has been fully devoted towards the basic human rights of the poor Adivasis and Dalits. Her prime focus was to bring the basic rights to the Dalits and poor Adivasis in order that they might come into the mainstream. Her heart weeps bitterly when she sees the condition of the unprivileged and downtrodden people. The depiction of Mahasweta Devi is based on reality. Devi in all her works goes on depicting the miserable condition of the poor Adivasis and Dalits. Her sharp eyes travel a long distance and observe the deeply rooted pitiable condition of the helpless tribal people.

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