

# Mahasweta Devi's Works Discussed on Marginalization to Empowerment

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**Abstract** – Mahasweta Devi's works discussed below clearly reflect the author's concern for the underprivileged who are deprived of their basic rights by the dominant upper classes. Devi's works do not present a glorified image of the own-trodden, but they certainly present their lives in the midst of adversity and show their spirit and strength to resist any form of social oppression. In order to understand Mahasweta Devi's discourse on class, caste and gender oppression and her portrayal of the spirit of the oppressed, the researcher quotes from Gail Omvedt, *Dalits, and the Democratic Revolution*, where the spirit of the oppressed is effectively portrayed: "Things began to change" when someone brought him news of Naxalbari and aroused a spirit of rebellion that created a power. Such a change indicated above can also be seen in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Thus, the author's discourse of class, caste, and gender oppression reveals a unique narrative of the downtrodden, his / her oppression, and finally his / her resistance to oppression. Such a discourse on class, caste and gender oppression in Mahasweta Devi's work is the basic argument of the thesis. In Omvedt's book, the awareness of the oppressed in his distress is likened to the situation of a dead man's resurrection and to his act of cutting off the branches of feudalism. The oppressed are humiliated, whipped, killed and denied the status of a human being. And his wife is being treated like a prostitute.

**Keywords** : Democratic Revolution, Dominant Upper Classes, Oppression

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## GENDER - CONSCIOUSNESS

"I never consider myself a woman writer, a feminist. Nothing. I am a writer, and when I write, I write about people who live far below the poverty line. They're men, women, children. I'm not insulating women. Women have a lot to pay for. They have special problems, too. They come to my stories, of course, not just to support the woman. [A] woman in poor class, suffers because of her class, suffers because of her body. It's a law there. It's got to be brought out, but that doesn't mean I'm especially gender-biased."

The above quotation by Mahasweta Devi is in line with Virginia Woolf's argument that the best artists were always a combination of man and woman, or 'man-woman,' and 'woman-woman.' Woolf's androgynous creative mind was an attempt to move beyond the male / female binary. She argued, on the basis of Carl Jung's psychological theories, that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the male predominates over the female, and in the woman's brain the female predominates over the male. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live together in harmony, they cooperate spiritually...

An Indian woman writer cannot refrain from women's concerns, and Mahasweta Devi is no exception. In an interview with Gabrielle Collu, Mahasweta argued that she is not a feminist but an activist, and despite feminist readings of her as a champion of oppressed women, her women are an integral part of all dispossessed communities. Being a woman belonging to the dispossessed communities aggravates injustices, exploitation, oppression, assaults that worsen the pain and, in the case of women, silences her voice most of the time. The absence of this voice leads to a disconnection of the self with society. Spivak uses the term "subaltern women" to refer to subjects who are in a position to speak but who can not be properly listened to. Deprivations, deprivation, powerlessness, which are at the heart of her thematic concerns, assume a completely different dimension when it comes to female characters.

The female characters of Mahasweta Devi are placed at the heart of multiple victimhoods due to caste discrimination and economic exploitation, patriarchy and sexual exploitation. They become the epitome of suffering, pain and anguish, the silence of which pierces and insists on some definite change in their favour. But the victims have the will and the energy to stand up against all odds and show a tremendous desire for life. They

resist authority, stereotyping, icons, and gender-based survival and self-definition. Whatever the onslaught, they carry out their struggle by adopting a variety of survival aids rising again and again from ashes like a Phoenix, as Kishwar Naheed writes: "But neither the earth nor the woman / D sire or man if st life dies." "It is this desire to manifest life that makes women move on, perform their ascribed roles; fit in and resist wherever nectar.

As a post-colonial artist, Devi opts for contemporary roots in history.<sup>4</sup> The texts *Titu Mir*, *Romtha*, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, *Aandharmanik*, *Nati*, etc. are set in pre-independent India. As she points out, 'The history of the past (Champa, Dewana Khoimala) and the history of the present (Shareer, Dheebar, Pindadan, Jal, False Number) both constitute history. There are some storeys for all time (Ajir, Stanadaini). It is my conviction that a storey writer should be motivated by a sense of history that would help his readers to understand his own times.

### PROSTITUTION: WOMEN AS SALEABLE COMMODITIES

The most common form of victimisation in Devi's storeys is that of women succumbing to rampant male sexual violence in rural areas. They usually give up without resistance (Dhoul and Tura's daughter in *The Witch Hunt*), sometimes get pregnant (Dhoul, Douloti, Sanichari in the same name storey, and Josmina in *The Fairytale of Rajbhasa*) and are often sold for money by their own fathers (Douloti and the daughters of Giribala). As a result, prostitution becomes their meagre means of subsistence, perpetuating brutality and routinizing the indignity of their sexual exploitation. As Griffiths Ashcroft points out, "A woman is twice colonised and victimised as her body becomes a site of exploitation. The body itself was a literal text on which colonisation wrote some of its most graphic and searchable messages."<sup>59</sup>

In *Douloti*, the Bountiful two forms of bonded labour are described; male bonded labour with the storey of crook Nagesia, Douloti's father, and female bonded labour in the form of prostitution. The woman's body becomes the means to the loan in the Kamiya bonded labour system. Douloti is the godfather of bonded slave Ganori Nagesia, who, while working under impossible condition to repay his debt to the local landlord, breaks his body by trying to lift the cart and gets a permanent limp.

While at Hospital, an upper caste hustler visits the village, scouting for young tribal virgins, he sees Douloti as a teenager and decides to recruit her in his brothel. He thus promised to repay the three hundred rupee debts that Nagesia owed to Chandra and to release him from servitude in return for marriage to his daughter. Douloti is raped and abused again and again in Parmanand's brothel. Not only is it not compensated for its services, but

instead the money paid on behalf of its father is considered to be its original debt. Added to this is the money spent on the maintenance of Douloti and the interest is compounded by extortionate rates. Douloti has no choice but to become a bonded slave to Parmanand. She was finally released from her services at the age of twenty-seven after she had contracted syphilis and tuberculosis. Douloti means "abundant" or "abundant" is an allegory for post-Independence India. It is full of possibilities, yet it is betrayed, exploited, and ultimately made destitute.

Mahasweta's portrayal of the exploitation of women and the various forms of victimisation is broad and varied. Under some or other pretext, the patriarchal establishment has always deprived women of the agency. Since time immemorial, atrocities have been committed against the able or capable by brandishing them as a "Witch." Witches sustaining themselves, living in a domain in which men have no access, and exercising a knowledge that is secretive, have always infuriated men and, as a result, this imagined terror, born out of ignorance and a deep urge to revenge for all the real / imagined controls that circumscribe their lives; they set out on the mission of extinguishing / lynching / burning the witch. Witches have been feared, repulsed, ostracised, and have remained unacceptable to every human society. In *The Witch's* story, for example, there is a stupid and slow-witted Somri, the 'daini,' who comes out as a mute metaphor of patriarchal (feudal as well as subaltern) exploitation.

The *Witch's* narrative records the fact that both the feudal and the subaltern patriarchs are qualitative participants in the fabrication and fuelling of the superstitious dogma of 'witch-hood' and, consequently, the extinguishing of the woman in question. Having played the role of the forces governing their lives, the tribals are trying to gain control by eliminating the object of imagined terror. Mahasweta traces the logic behind tribal clinging to dogma. Weighed down by the overwhelming socio-economic and political pressures, living a life of destitute deprivation, the ignorant tribal seizes the imaginary and the superstitious. These people do not have a niche in the man-made economic cycle. Nature is the only hope. When it rains, crops grow, the forest thrives, roots and tubers are available, and there are fish in the river. Nature's breasts are dry and there is no rain. So they hold the daini responsible, and they're mad. The people of Bharat don't want it. If nature, too, turns away, they will be wiped out.

### TRANSCENDING BARRIERS: MARGINALIZATION TO EMPOWERMENT

Rudali, the focus of hunger, is a powerful critique of, and linkages between, the exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. In this painful struggle between human beings and

the overpowering hunger, everything else is losing its count. By showing the dire poverty of the villagers, the ways in which they are exploited, the burden of ritualised religion, the absolute power of the Malik-Mahajans (the landlord money-lender class) who have dispossessed the poor of this land in the years following independence, and the corruption of the privileged classes, Mahasweta Devi is building a powerful indictment. This indictment is made by villagers, or by direct authorial addresses placed throughout the text, which almost acts as a refrain.:

"Everything in this life is a battle." 67 Right from the outset, Mahasweta Devi places the central character of Sanichari in her historical situation, provides a socio-economic context, and points out that her problems are common to her class, caste and gender. She is a poor, low-caste farmer for whom nothing has ever been easy, but the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Every loss she suffers is due to the dire poverty, the constricted life, and the total lack of hope for any change or improvement. Malik-Mahajan Ramavatar embodies a system that dehumanises, brutalises and invades the most private space of an individual-emotions so that even grief is distorted by the desperate struggle for survival. For example, Sanichari did not cry when her mother-in-law died.

Her husband and her brother were in prison at the time because of Malik-Mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, Ramavatar Singh was locked up by the young dushad and ganju males of the village. She could not cry for the death of her in-law since there was no time to cry. Since there was no one around, she had to make arrangements for cremation on her own. Likewise, when her brother died to her in-law and his wife, Sanichari was once again unable to weep, because he was ten years old because Ramavatar was trying to get all the dushads and ganjus out of the village. She couldn't cry for her husband's death, as well as the government machinery didn't allow her time to cry, and there was an urgent need to feed her little son. A woman who could never lament the death of her near and dear ones is forced by poverty and hunger to take up the profession of mourner who laments the death of others for money and help.

### **MAHASHWETA DEVI MARGINALISED ON GENDER PERCEPTION**

The policy of segregating individuals on the basis of identity and position, based on notions such as marginalised, oppressed, rulers or subjects, elucidates the existence of disparity in society. Apart from these, there is also a group that has been neglected for years and barely recognised as a part of society. The researcher claims that domesticated dogs have a higher privilege than this group. This is the group at the core of society, but it is "silent and silent," and is mostly labelled as a subaltern. Although the question surrounding the actual definition of Subaltern is still indecisive, the individual

shares a devout affinity with his fellow subalterns in this vortex and tends to invoke a deep sense of content when in a parallel company. This content is often used to question its very subaltern status, which Mahasweta Devi tends to emphasise in her work.

Although the changing condition of the subaltern is to be applauded, a fact to be remembered and which is also the claim of many critics is the question of the subaltern losing the subaltern identity as soon as he or she develops intellectually and begins to act as the spokesperson of the very subaltern group to which he or she belongs. This condition makes it conceivable that the voice of the subordinates lingers in the circle representing each other. Their assembled knowledge is an intrinsic feature that hyper-narrates their representation. But the loop side of this discourse is the truth that it is this assembled cognition that accelerates the majority's alienation from the Subaltern group, negating the very intent of the assembled cognition.

Gender, which is one of these Subaltern groups, has been at the forefront of the feminist movement since the 1980s. The term Gender has usually been used to describe the societal differences between men and women. Joan Scott defines the concept of gender as "a means of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed entity. The symbolic assembly of "gender" used in disparity with the concept of "sex" which refers to their biological difference negates the rights of the individual. For the same reason, the idea behind gender studies has included a discursive configuration of human comprehension along with social establishments and practises that determine the different pathways in which men and women are perceived as dissimilar and asymmetrical. It also examines those structures and practises that have kept women in a subservient position vis-à-vis men, and has denied them equal rights as a social and political entity throughout history.

Through such influential and dissident narratives, Mahasweta reminds the reader that motherhood is an uncertain notion with the potential for both limitation and liberation. Her maternal figures exemplify the ambiguity that arises when they discuss the different discourses of motherhood common to Indian society. In each of these works, she situates the motherhood survey in the larger socio-historical context of the tribe and links it to related issues of ecology, class and tribe. As Maithreyi Krishnaray points out,

"The feminist dilemma is how to retrieve motherhood as a source of liberation, not by eliminating it as an obstacle, but by redefining appropriate terms and conditions, by re-creating a

social structure that can make motherhood conceivably a creative experience ... "(Bagchi 35).

Mahashweta Devi seems to have achieved this in no small measure through her portrayal of tribal mothers, particularly through the figures of Nishadin and Tejota, through whom she upholds the principles of an earlier tribal society that stands in bleak contrast to those of today's world. Its narratives of tribal mothers, from the empowered tribal matriarch and mythical mothers to the poorest of today's tribal mothers, thus offer an alternative vision of motherhood that is not usually suggested in Indian fiction, and is worth noting for its rational, empowering and visionary qualities.

Mahashweta Devi's women's oriented texts symbolise the resistance that tribal women face in post-colonial India, the most subjugated among Indian women. Mahashweta's fictions depict a range of injustices directed at tribal and other women of subaltern communities, in the process of criticising, among other things, the structures of the patriarchy in the family and society, the tribe / class / caste hierarchies, the nationalistic oratory, the policy of progress and the management and legal equipment of the state. Her texts narrate their situations as wounded by the most brutal aggression and misuse as tribal communities lose their traditional surroundings and are forced to join the unorganised labour classes of India in an embarrassing and grim resistance to endurance. They also engage decisively with the discursive structures of saga, history and modern reality to recognise the sites of female resistance. Mahashweta also engages with the discourse of motherhood within the larger structure of tribal individuality and articulates it as an uncertain notion with the potential for both liberation and restriction. Women's discourse in her narratives reverberate against a few males, centred on key discourses that shape the exact socio-historical moments of the storey. Her books thus engage in a variety of discourses and practises that describe and maintain gendered subjectivities in the political and socio-cultural structures of society in relation to tribal culture and life.

The recent perception that gender studies have aroused is the aggregated consideration of the gender issue that Western Feminism tends to categorise. The myth of Western civilization that the experience of white women is sufficient to gauge the experience of the total population of women worldwide has shattered the reverie of Feminism worldwide. Finally, after a strong sense of hopelessness, gender studies in India have opened up and realised that Western xenophobia and its definition of gender equality do not fit well in the Indian context. So, though in a much smaller context, Feminism in India has argued that the view of India's multi-colored women is to derive the real scenario. In all, it can be said that at least in India, gender studies have become more aware of the many intersections

of gender roles with that of class and race. This has led to the sensitization of Feminism in India, albeit limited to a very short extent, but it is a starting point given the inherent cross-cultural fabric of Indian society.

Their narratives are based on their general morals of life. Uttara feels secure in their common, collective and natural pattern of living. She was unaware of this reality of living. Uttara is questioning their return as she is experiencing the five women's natural life prototypes that consider birth, marriage, death, and other parts of sadness to be nature. They are confident that they will be married to brothers-in-law as they return to the village. This is the exact symbol of the subaltern females who accept life as nature. They remain conscious of their patterns of life and work to make it happen. It's different from the imperial family group that Uttara's mother-in-law, knowing these realities, wants to avoid in her life. Moreover, they do not openly articulate their morals, but they keep making gossips in their midst. These gossips make their lives more expressive.

The storey begins with rumours as it begins with the combined voices, "hai, hai" (the wailing voices) for the lost husbands. It binds the women of the outskirts. The sound could not have been of value to the imperial people. They express sympathy for the wives of the foot soldiers and count them as a valuable part of their struggle. But these women live with songs and contributions from their own people. When Gomati, who makes Uttara laugh and take pleasure in her mates, shares that "the sole weapon of the foot soldiers is the lance," she looks down as her thoughts are flooded that Uttara and other royal females could not understand.

But in her stillness, Uttara realises the true morals of life. It is the spirit of the female subaltern that they live life with reality. Gomati reproaches the leader of dasis, Madraja, who says that the dead Abhimanyu is going to paradise as he died in the dharma yuddha. Gomati is of the opinion that such faiths are false and disgrace, "Shame on you, Madraja! The woman of Kurujungle! But talk like a rajavritta? "This sense is required in the midst of females. They make rumours as a source of the articulation of their sorrows and of the readjustment of their principles. They don't want to be changed as 'Rajvritta' because their spirit belongs to farming families. They sing songs together, they share common principles, and they could make everyone feel alive. When Uttara's mother-in-law arrives and reminds her to follow Rajvritta's way, Uttara cries out, No, Arya! It's about them. I feel like I'm still alive! Silence of the imperial family is not a part of life for these five women who create the rumours of their weeping.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the themes of the gender and identity that are prominent in her works in the social sphere.
2. To understand that sex and identity are the main aspects that affect an individual's life, in particular in our subalteric society.

## CONCLUSION

Devi believes that caste is always identified with class, but at the same time, makes a plea to her readers not to think in the way she thinks, but to find it on her own. She has chosen to keep certain social, economic, political and psychological realities at the centre of her creative vision. She does not propose a direct solution by acting as an advocate for any cause; rather, what she does is witness through the environment of her storey, which is an inseparable part of her activism. The subject of this thesis is the different levels of exploitation taking place in the name of caste, class and gender. The concluding chapter attempts to summarise and recapitulate the contents of the preceding chapters, highlighting Mahasweta Devi's views on class, caste and gender, and her views on patterns of oppression that occur in different ways. It reiterates the arguments put forward in the entire thesis and also discusses the findings of the researcher on the subject of research. Finally, it considers the potential areas of Mahasweta Devi research that do not lie within the scope of this research topic.

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