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**Retracing the Narrative of
Subalternity: Historical
Evolutions and New
Applications.
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E-Seminar

Retracing the Narrative of Subalternity: Historical Evolutions and New Applications

28th of July 2021

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The Voice of the ‘Have-nots’ in the select novels of Mahasweta Devi

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Mahasweta Devi is one of the most spirited women writers of the present times. She has carved out a niche for herself in the field of socially relevant literature. An essentially humanistic vision enshrined in her works has left an indelible mark on the present literary scenario. She has written more than hundred literary works to her credit including novels, short stories, plays, books written for children and various articles for newspapers, magazines and journals. Her works have been translated into English and various Indian languages such as Assamese, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Gujarati, Kannada and a tribal language-Ho.

The English translation of her works into English shot her into fame on the international literary arena. Her major works which have been translated into English include novels and novellas *The Queen of Jhansi*, *Mother of 1084*, *Titu Mir*, *Operation? Bashai Tudu* and *Rudali*. Other translated works include various collections of short stories such as *Bitter Soil*, *Breast Stories*, *Imaginary Maps*, *Old Women*, *Outcast*. The collections of plays entitled *Five Plays* and a collection of activist writings entitled *Dust on the Road*. She is now a major postcolonial writer, referred to in significant discussions of

postcolonial theory. Mahasweta Devi's writings are vitally important to the modern times. Her activism and its absolute relevance to certain burning contexts of the third world society foreground her genuine concern for social issues. The basis of her works is her preoccupation with the marginalized and the downtrodden or the 'subalterns'.

This term denotes:

‘Subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labour, the tribals and communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside . . . disadvantaged sectors within the metropolis, particularly those involuntary economic migrants represented by the 'urban-house worker'.¹

These have-nots of society form the core of Mahasweta Devi's writings, which is an integral form of her activism at grass-root level. Her undying concern for the weak and the oppressed is reflected in every aspect of her work and life. Perhaps she is among the few writers determined to change the lot of the underdogs of society.

Mahasweta Devi, thus, gives voice to those suffering multitudes, helplessly caught in the vortex of feudalism. She speaks for these victims of dreadful national ingratitude, whose cries of despair and protest go unheard. Her activist works are a comment on the way man has debased himself and society. A writer of rare sensitivity, Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka in a family of literatures, film-makers and artists. She obtained Bachelor's degree in English Honours from Shantiniketan and Master's degree in English from Calcutta University.

Mahasweta Devi's literary career spans well over five decades. Her first work was a short essay on Tagore's Cheley Bela in a journal entitled Rang Mahal (1939). However, 1956 is considered to be a landmark year, when her first novel Jhansi Rani (the Queen of Jhansi) was published. With 1857 uprisings as background, the novel brings to the fore Queen

Lakshmi Bai as a leader of soldiers on the one hand and on the other as a mother concerned about the well-being of her son. The book is a valuable contribution to the Indian historiography. Her second book *Nati* was published in 1957. Another significant novel of this period is *Hajar Chaurashir Ma* (Mother of 1084), a novel with an urban setting that deals with the Naxalite Movement of the early seventies.

The neglected and deprived humanity is oblivious and ignorant of the nation but it still remains in focus because of the suffering afflicted on it by the powerful elites, who have social, political and economic control of the nation. Everything is denied to them. The fate of the marginalized is the same the world over. They are, “abject-outcast and derided subjects stripped of agency and exiled from a hostile community as living symbols of defilement.”² Adding to their woes is the fact that even the government has no empathy for them and turns a blind eye towards their problems. On account of this discriminatory treatment denial, deprivation and dependency become their lot.

An important theme in the writings of Mahasweta Devi is the subhuman condition of the tribals. She has devoted her life to the welfare of the tribal communities. A crusader and pioneer in this field, she fights for the rights of the 'denotified' tribal communities and nomadic tribal groups. She characterizes them as "suffering spectators of India that is traveling towards the twenty-first century."³ Though constituting about one-sixth of the total population of the country they are the most neglected section of the Indian society and carry on the legacy of pain inflicted first by the British colonizers and then by the neo-colonialists. They were 'notified' by the government as criminals in 1871, denotified in 1952 and 13 reclassified as habitual offenders in 1959 as per Habitual Offenders Act. Ironically the discrimination that began in the British rule was further aggravated as this time it was their own countrymen who denied them their due status. Like the rest of India, they should have enjoyed the fruits of independence. Instead they have languished as the most handicapped community in India, with their health, literacy and employment levels far below the average.

Mahasweta voices the pain and sufferings of the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Lodhas, Sabars and many other such tribes who have suffered atrocities in colonial as well as postcolonial era. Dispossessed of their land, they have to beg for their needs and are forced into an abominable existence

In her works, Mahasweta Devi gives a firsthand account of the oppression of the labourers at the hands of feudal lords and the callous attitude of the perpetrators of such a system, where bonded labourers are just slaves and their life has no value. Mahasweta Devi's characters right from Bono, Ganori Nagesia in Doulooli the Bountiful to Aajir in Aajir, are bonded workers. Ganori Nagesia became kamiya or bonded labour when he gave his thumbprint to Munabar and took three hundred rupees. It is not just the inability to pay back the loans that forces people into bonded labour but abject poverty too pushes them into it. In a country where more than eighty percent people live below the poverty line, child labour and bonded labour are the natural byproducts of the system. This is the ugly face of a materialistic world. Mahasweta Devi in her article, "Contract Labour or Bonded Labour," comments on their agony:

The young ones are waiting for the inevitable dalal to come one day and take them away. Many are going Even the young ones are not against becoming kamiya or seokia. 'What to do? There is nothing else for the likes of us.' The land given to the freed bonded labourers is uncultivable. . . . There is no water for drinking or irrigation; no chance of being employed by government agencies for road-repairing, timber felling. . . . Forsaken by the government and society. these people, in order to stay alive, enter debt bondage. They do not have any alternative.⁴

To make matters worse this social evil flourishes in the form of intergeneration bondage. Once a person sells himself to a money-lender he and his descendants are doomed to a life of eternal servitude. Dubia and Kolia tribes in Maharashtra and Eijhawa, Cherum, Pooli and Holia tribes in Madras and Kamiya in Bihar are victims of this malpractice. Aajir in Mahasweta Devi's play Aajir narrates how centuries ago famine struck the tracts of Ayodhya hills. At this juncture his ancestor Golak, in order to save his life sold himself, his family and his descendants for a paltry sum of three rupees.

Mahasweta Devi through her efforts justifies the faith reposed in her. She silently treads on an endless journey bearing on her shoulders the cross of oppression and sufferings of the people kept at the periphery rather than waiting for the arrival of some Messiah. Even at the age of eighty two, she is working with a revolutionary fervour and zeal. She continues to write for the subalterns, whom she identifies with and works for. Old age cannot deter her spirits. She still looks forward to experimenting with new ideas, plans and ventures. As Maitreya Ghatak observes:

For her, life has never meant looking back, only looking forward to new ideas, schemes, projects and activities. To motivating and enthusing others to organize themselves for their own development. To taking sides. To speaking up where silence would be a shame. To making trouble where not to do so would be a crime.⁵

Mahasweta Devi's works to be discussed below clearly reflect the author's concern for the underprivileged Dalits, Adivasis, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who are deprived of their basic rights by the dominant upper classes. Devi's works do not present a glorified picture of the downtrodden but they certainly present their lives amidst

adversity and exhibit their spirit and strength to resist any form of social oppressions. To understand Mahasweta Devi's discourse on class, caste and gender oppression and her depiction of the spirit of the oppressed

Crossing all barriers of caste and class, Mahasweta Devi became committed to the cause of the Tribals, Dalits and Adivasis in the states of Orissa, West Bengal and Bihar. Her commitment to the socially marginalized has brought three facets to her literary and political writings- social activism, social criticism and aesthetics of the oppressed. In these three facets is revealed her concern for the underprivileged and her contempt for ruling class who, by ignoring the oppressed, directly or indirectly have taken part in the process of their exploitation. They also reveal her infinite admiration for the marginalized and their zeal to withstand and resist oppression through centuries. With the marginalized as the subject of her writings, she creates the aesthetics of the oppressed.

Other than class oppression as seen in the above works, Mahasweta Devi also deals with caste oppression that is predominant in the following works- Aajir, Bayen, Water and Rudali. These works reflect the concerns of individuals suffering from the dehumanizing scheme of slavery, the negligence of old people belonging to lower castes and the conservative lifestyle of the rural masses. Among the works listed above, Rudali is a relevant novel to understand Mahasweta Devi's approach to caste oppression. The play Aajir deals with social realism, exposing the effects of dehumanizing system of slavery.

Bayen (witch) depicts the tragedy of a mother branded as a witch, banished from the village and separated from her son. Mahasweta Devi rewrites the story of rebellion of the outcaste, when Chandidasi, accused as the 'evil eye' saves many lives by averting a train accident, sacrificing her life in the process. Similarly, the play water stages the protest of the Domes, who are deprived of employment opportunities and fair wages, denied relief materials coming from the Government and prohibited from drinking water from public wells. Rudali revolves around the lower caste Ganju tribal woman's tale of exploitation, survival and struggle.

Mahasweta Devi builds up the history of repression of the Ganjús and the Dushads by the Rajputs. Devi, through the story of Sanichari is able to give both the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic view of caste oppression. It is not merely the oppression of tribal's and the underprivileged castes that have been her subject of attention and concern in her works. She gives importance to women and their lives too. In some of her works, Mahasweta Devi deals with the following women's issues loneliness, separation and old age; women's struggle for survival amidst general suffering; exploitative situations like rape, marital violence, death and its loss, motherhood, negligence of the diseased female, prostitution and female slavery. Devi's extensive travelling aided her to witness the varying degrees of oppression and exploitation meted out to women in all sections of society

Other than 'exploitation', 'marginalization' is an important subject of oppression in Mahasweta Devi's works. „Marginalization“ according to Young is an act of exclusion, of relegating or confining an individual or a group of people to a lower social standing or the edge of society. Mahasweta Devi reveals that marginalization is worse than exploitation with Maghai's example. Mahasweta Devi's downtrodden characters reveal how they are denied participation in any social, political and religious activities and subjected to total deprivation.

Marginalization deprives an individual of his or her economic, social and political rights thereby ostracizing the individual from society. For example as the cities grew in Australia, the aboriginal communities of Australia were excluded from society and pushed farther and farther away from their homelands. Similarly, in India the lower castes/classes are mostly the marginalized class because of their low status, nature of work and the caste to which they belong. Mulk Raj Anand's well-known story Untouchable also represents similar form of oppression where the protagonist Bakha shows distaste for the life he leads because of the oppression of the upper castes who deny him the right to live like others and enjoy the opportunities and privileges which are

rightfully meant for all sections of society. Oppression of this group occurs because of their occupation and caste.

Devi's play *Bayen* highlights this marginalization vividly where the central character works as a grave digger. The bayen, Chandidasi's life is a moving portrayal of gendered subalternity that is depicted through her transformation from a working class woman to a social pariah. Grave digging is a kind of work exclusively meant to be performed by certain lower sections of people. Chandidasi inherits the vocation from her father and as a grave digger; she lives with her family on the outskirts, distanced from the upper class people. In the later part of her life, she is tagged as a 'bayen' (meaning witch), banished outside the village and also deprived of work, food, clothes and shelter. The villagers are superstitious about a 'bayen', so they constrain her within the construct of her lower caste and vocation.

Similarly the "rudalis" in Devi's novella *Rudali* are another category of people isolated from society since they touch the dead bodies and mourn for the dead. Such a marginalization forms the subject of argument here: Still crying, she washed off the sin door from her head in the shallow Kuruda River, broke her bangles, and returned to the village. The panda of the Shiva temple at Tohri demanded that she made ritual offerings there before returning to her village, since her husband had died there. On his insistence she spent a precious rupee and a quarter on a Spartan offering of sand and sattu which Budhua offered as panda (*Rudali* 56-7).

'Powerlessness' which argues that some people, 'have' power and some 'have not', has a close link with Marx's theory of socialism. Individuals without power are dominated by those with power. Devi's writings subvert the authority of the phallogocentric, caste and class-ridden society. Her activist aesthetics further dismantles the mainstream and the anti-feminist.

To conclude, Mahasweta Devi is not merely a champion of the underprivileged or a successful creative writer but also an honest and tireless narrator of the world of the

exploited. What makes her a distinct writer is her power to mix realism with melodrama, irony with indifference and the documentary with creativity to produce a wonderful and unusual blend that defies any accepted model. Her relentless battle for the homeless and the oppressed is not just confined to fiction writing but finds expression in other genres of non-fiction writing that has created a great impact.

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