



## The Oppressed and the Underprivileged in the Works of Mahasweta Devi : A Critical Study

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The Oppressed and the Underprivileged in the Works of Mahasweta Devi : A Critical Study ABSTRACT This present paper is devoted to the study of the downtrodden and the underprivileged in the works of Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta Devi belongs to such group of writers who believe in the concept of 'Art for the sake of life'. A deep and thorough study of the works of Mahasweta Devi clearly reveals her sympathetic attitude towards the dalit and the deserted who have to bear the brunt of social discrimination and identity crisis.

### Abstract

This present paper is devoted to the study of the downtrodden and the underprivileged in the works of Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta Devi belongs to such group of writers who believe in the concept of 'Art for the sake of life'. A deep and thorough study of the works of Mahasweta Devi clearly reveals her sympathetic attitude towards the dalit and the deserted who have to bear the brunt of social discrimination and identity crisis. 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 downtrodden, 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, Identity crisis.

An Indian woman writer can not 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, powerlessness, 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 great 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. V.Rajarajeswari rightly observes:

Working for the betterment of the tribals of India is the lifetime mission of Mahasweta Devi. The life and the history of tribals such as Santhals, Hos, Oraons, Kurunis, Mundas and others are highlighted in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Her life's mission serving the cause of tribals started since 1976. Districts of Mayurbhanj, Medinapur, Purulia in West Bengal, tribal villages in Bihar, Orissa drew the attention of Mahasweta Devi.<sup>1</sup>

The most common form of victimisation in Devi's works is that of women succumbing to rampant male sexual violence in rural areas. They usually give up without resistance (Dhouli and Tura 's daughter in *The Witch Hunt*), sometimes get pregnant (Dhouli, 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.

While at Hospital, an upper caste host 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 Chandela 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 she is compensated for her services, but instead the money paid on behalf of her father is considered to be her 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 /bunning 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.

It is to be noted that the works of Mahasweta Devi have exercised a great influence on the works of Bama, who is a great champion of the voice of the oppressed. About Bama, Dr. Peter Joseph says;

Bama as a feminist urges Dalit Women to be strong and resolute and not to allow their minds to be worn out and impaired. As a woman with great visions and aspirations Bama strongly believes that education alone alleviates poverty in the Dalit communities.<sup>2</sup>

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 ‘wich-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.

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.

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 Mahashweta 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.

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.

It is interesting to note here that 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.

## Conclusion

Thus, Mahasweta 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.

## References

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