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RETRIEVING SUBALTERN WOMEN EXPERIENCE THROUGH MAHASWETA DEVI'S *WATER*

Dr. E. Ranjith, Assistant Professor Department of English, Loyola College, Vettavalam - 606 754

Mr. N. Rajesh, Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada-08

Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi reconstructs subaltern women's experiences to reflect on the politics of subalternization, genderization and marginalization. She refuses to use the public distinction in an unproblematic way; she rather incorporates the political issues of gender and sexuality while narrating her subaltern-centric ideas. Her Water depicts subaltern problems of tribal. The present research article is humble attempt to study her debut work Water and bring out tribal woman's suffering.

Key Words: Subaltern experience, marginalization, contemporary oppression, suffering humanity etc.

Mahasweta Devi reconstructs subaltern women's experiences to reflect on the politics of subalternization, genderization and marginalization. She refuses to use the public distinction in an unproblematic way; she rather incorporates the political issues of gender and sexuality while narrating her subaltern-centric ideas. In the play *Water* Maghai becomes a metaphor of resistance. He is representative of millions of tribal men who are fighting against oppression and who can dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy. The subalterns are marginalized in more ways than one as they live in a constant fear of victimization. Mahasweta Devi rededicates herself in her commitment to represent the problems of the marginalized sections in different formats. In the play *Water* also she finds an occasion to represent the issues related to marginality. She invites deliberations through dramatic art form where she highlights the cruelties of upper class towards the deprived sections of the society. She strongly regrets that the harassment of the innocent folk which continues unchecked in the rural area with a hidden consent of the ruling class. The play conceptualizes a bird's eye-view pictures of nerve-breaking poverty, back-bending exploitation as well as fierce class clashes, suggesting impossibility of a decent life for the poor and illiterate living in remote villages. She clearly exposes the exploitative conspiracy of the religious and textual authority against the subaltern. Through a system of historically constructed roles, the Brahminical cultural history regulates contemporary oppression. Maghai Dome, a traditional water-diviner re-enacts the tale of the legendary Bhagirath who brought the divine Ganga down from the locks of Shiva to the earth in the Puranic tale. Maghai, who believes that his ancestors have been chosen by the goddess Ganga to bring her hidden source to the surface in exchange for worship, falls into the fallacy of his predetermined or preordained role. Though Maghai and his people are denied the very water he divines, he has to continue performing the divine rituals since he is the 'Bhagirath of Nether Ganga'. Maghai's knowledge- his gift of supernatural divining power from his ancestral lineage drives the system. The idea of his role being historically sanctioned legitimates the appropriation of the subaltern's skills and their deployment to perpetuate his subordination through the textual authority. In order to perpetuate the history of exploitation in the recent times, the ancient legend is pressed into service by the dominant, hegemonic powers.

The play also explores the interweaving of the dynamics of rural poverty with the machinations of the local landed elite in collusion with local village officials and the police. The cruelty which appeared in rural Bengal is conceptualized through the play *Water through the tribal narratives* and presents the

widespread dismay of Indian rural poor at large. Here in this play we the readers find exploited subaltern men and women who despite deprivation are vigorous and not passive, sensible and caring, suppressed and yet practical, capable of showing urge towards claiming agency and authority for themselves.

Interestingly, the play is concerned with what Devi calls 'the history of the present' and in its impulse of social protest. It is complementary to the plays discussed in the earlier chapters, but more powerful for its scathing expose of the utter indifference of the people in power towards the suffering humanity in the rural world. In fact, the area of attack is much more defined and precise than in her other plays. The play, thus, represents Mahasweta Devi's more powerful indictment of the existing social values and her unfailing commitment and passion for the underdog.

The dramatic vision of Mahasweta Devi is exclusively concerned with men and women who "moulded, groomed, trained and matured by a whole community, through and within its experience of suffering" (xi), begin to revolt against traditionally defined class roles and become martyrs in pursuit of their self. Samik Bandyopadhyay rightly states that there is a continuum between Mahasweta Devi's "Mothers and leaders of men, between the cold, growing awareness of the former shaping into resistance, or stopping at the very edge of defiance, and the evolving militancy of the latter" (x).

She does not introduce her protagonists from high scale background. Also they do not carry any political motives with them. But they develop strong ties with the community and grow to the role of leader of the masses. These characters share their deep felt experiences from their day to day life happenings. They grew up to the level of understanding the political motifs which are brooded on the society. Finally, they come out with a personal awareness, the huge impersonal, dehumanizing experience of exploitation that their community endures. In a sense, they realise the bare fact that they are in the state of human in an inhuman society. They are fully conscious of their inner urge for freedom and they make no bones about their hatred for the constraining conventions of the present society.

The setting of the story is laid in rural Bengal. The play provides us with an authentic account of the transformation of a subaltern from a traditional water-diviner to the position of a leader of the masses, breaking down all those conventional boundaries which have been devised only to deprive his class of its human dignity. In *Water*, Mahasweta Devi selects her main story from a new viewpoint of the Hindu myth of Ganga and Bhagirath (The king who brought down to earth the Ganges from the heavens). The play is an aggressive attack on and denunciation of the typical Hindu psyche. It explores how a sect of people through the milieu of Hindu mythology exploits the weaker section and pushed them into bonded labourers. They take it for granted and tried to produce profits while not compensating them fairly. Writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and other Indian writers produced the same level of subjects. Yet Mahasweta Devi's treatment of subject matter of this kind stands unique. Although these people are paid for their efforts and toils, they are not paid a fair wage. Such exploitation appears in Devi's play *Water* where the Dalit dome (untouchable), Maghais forced to dig village wells by the upper caste master for minimum wages and sometimes with no wages. Ironically exploitation here is not only in the line of caste but also in the line of class since these villagers and also deprived of work, food, clothes and shelter. Village wells also belong to lower castes although they are prohibited to use them. Maghai Dome is the protagonist in the play. He is a traditional water-diviner and an untouchable. The untouchables of the village are not allowed to draw water from the public wells, even though they are dug with Maghai's help. Santosh Pujari, an archetypal exploiter, is a force to reckon with in the land. He makes the innocent folk suffer for no fault of theirs. He denies what is due to them. Trading in the relief funds meant for the poorer sections, he creates an artificial famine. The villagers, with help coming from nowhere, accept whatever little amount he fixes for their toil at his fields.

Maghai knows that he was a water-diviner. He has the ability to identify the available source of ground water. Even though he identifies the water, he is disallowed to take water from his own identified

sources. For this, he becomes rebellious and defiant. He gives value to the teacher who advises him to build a dam across the river Charsa which runs by his hut, “every monsoon she overflows her banks, yet it never struck me with that this river could give us water, in days of drought” (139). Nevertheless, Santosh, and his caste brethren, threatened as they are by the adventure of Maghai, have the authorities believe that all the outcasts have turned Naxals and Jiten is the main instigator. Thus, the play comes to an end with the authorities breaking the dam and killing Maghai who is later seen being swept away by the waters of Charsa, his beloved. Compared to other plays of Mahasweta Devi, *Water* is a moderately extended play with a well-knit structure of fourteen scenes. All these scenes are connected logically with one another highlighting her social accountability. The stage is free from the conventions of all the external trappings of a conventional theatre. The exposed stage gives the playwright more freedom to present, on the same setting, various dramatic situations that take place at different locales without taxing the belief of the audience. It also allows the playwright to be more faithful in the depiction of everyday realities of the contemporary society. Besides, the influence of Brecht is clearly discernible in the incorporation of songs as well as in the tight construction of the scenes. Apparently, the playwright, by allowing her characters to address the audience directly at times, never lets the latter forget that it is sitting in a theatre. Moreover, the dramatic resources of gesture and mime are used to a greater advantage.

The villagers adore and address Maghai as Bhagirath. They believe in the fact, that he has the visionary power of identifying the source the ground water. In spite of being subjected to denial of the fruit of his own endeavour, he continues to do the job for keeping alive his ancestral tradition. Here, Maghai, resembles Paatan of *Aajir* and Chandidasi of *Bayen* who have been exploited and are compelled to follow the traditions of their ancestors. Thus, her stories take us to the roots of the problem of complete ignorance on the part of the so-called ideas of progress.

When the villagers are facing the sufferings, Jiten Maiti comes to liberate the villagers from their hardships. Jiten Maiti is a social worker and an idealistic teacher, who comes to their rescue and develops a kind of affinity with the villagers. He lives with them and shares their joys and sorrows. Therefore, Santosh the land lord of the village sensed a threat from Jiten Maiti and his ardent activities. Having sensed danger from his activities, Santosh motivated the authorities to act against Jiten Maiti. At a certain point of time he realised that it was a very tough task to bribe him. But Jiten doesn't surrender himself for momentary materialistic needs. Instead, he strongly fights against the landlord Santosh. The teacher proved himself that he is a staunch follower of Gandhian ideals and does not care for his personal pleasures. He continues to search for the ways to solve the problem of water caused by Santosh. He is very strong on his committed ideology.

Maghai Dome's job of identifying the ground water resources continues endless. His choicest blessings are there on the villagers whenever a new well is to be dug. Having been compelled to follow the tradition started by his ancestors, he is caught in a predicament like that of Paatan and Chandi in the preceding plays. However, unlike the attitude of many wage earners, he is neither bound to any external force nor gave up the roots of his ancestral profession. He is rather revered by all the people of his village for his extraordinary skills of water divining for which he claims a mythical-traditional sanction as Bhagirath of the nether Ganga. He feels proud of having inherited the secret knowledge from his great ancestors. He tells his son Dhura: “So the neither Ganga flowed into the secret depths of the mother Earth. My earliest ancestor had come all prepared to offer *puja* to the holy river at her advent. But by the time he arrived, Bhagirath had already left with Ganga. So, he stuffed himself up with booze, gathered the entire offerings he had brought with him to offer to the holy river, and offered *puja* to the nether Ganga. “... the mother deity of all the hidden waters, spoke: You're my chosen priest. I'm the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you'll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig”(111).

Mahasweta Devi's creative work in any art form whether it is fiction or drama has been characterised by a flair for authentic documentations of the spirit and passions of the time without any touch of romanticism. She had an intimate knowledge of rural India, a progressive outlook, and a sense of social awareness, which she lent to the writings of fiction. The present literary piece *Water* focuses on the harsh life of the Indian peasant caught in the web of inhuman landlords and heartless money lenders. Her originality lies in the ability to present modern problems in parallelisms of past incidents. Mahasweta Devi renders a rare blend of revolutionary originality and activism. All her plays including *Water* not only document the predicament of the down-trodden from an insider's point of view but is a comment on bird's eye view attitude of the majority of writers, who fantasize poverty and sub-human existence of the lower strata of society. She depicts the stark reality of the life of have-nots of society, stripping away the romanticized aura, generally associated with peaceful village life. She is also critical of Indian writers, who, in spite of living in a country bedeviled with so many problems, do not seem to find material for their writings. She feels that a conscientious writer, has to take a firm stand in defense of the exploited, otherwise history would never forgive him. The playwright attempts to give an altogether different interpretation to the myths steeped in people's consciousness and evolves new myths to suit her own message. In an article entitled, 'Untapped Resources', Mahasweta Devi writes: "It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and puranas interesting, I use them with a new interpretation" (17).

In fact, he exercises power in the villages and even the authorities' stand in support of him. Here Santosh Pujari can be compared with Gourdas of *Bayen*. He (Santosh Pujari) gets a large amount of relief material from the government and hoards it to create an artificial famine so that the innocent folk obey his dictates. He does not allow the low castes to draw water even from Panchayat wells for "we worship our gods in our houses and you eat pigs and fowl. Now tell me, isn't the water polluted if you touch it?" (104). Maghai and his people can't use the water from the wells because of their low caste. Class-discrimination in India has reduced a large part of rural life to a sub-human level. West Bengal has a history of constant famines both natural and manmade. The poor left with no choice often move to other villages or die of hunger. Maghai, though aware of Santosh Pujari's evil designs continues to work for him. He knows that it is he "who's been the water-diviner for all four wells - the panchayat ones as well as the others" (104). Yet he is not able to give a drop of water to his "mothers, sons, fathers, brothers" (139). We are given an insight into his pitiable condition in Scene IV:

"MAGHAI (*raising the basket close to his eyes*). Can you tell me, wife, how I lost my sight? ...

PHULMANI. Why? What's wrong with your eyes? ...

MAGHAI. I'm not weaving any patched quilt. It's only baskets I'm weaving from bamboo stalk, but even that I can't see.

DHURA. Haven't I asked you so many times to go to the town to have a check-up at the hospital, and have you ever paid heed?

MAGHAI. Have a check-up at the hospital! Easy to say, but who pays for my going and coming back?

DHURA. Why? Santosh Pujari? ...

MAGHAI (*in rage*) Hey, hey Dhura!

DHURA. (*Angry*) He can't have a well dug without your help. So you go about helping him dig all those wells. Then why shouldn't he pay you to have your eyes treated?" (108)

The presentation of this conversation impressively focuses the sorrow of a man, who despite his significant social role, "He can't have a well dug without your help" (108), couldn't afford to go to the town for a health check-up. Maghai is torn within by the conflict between his personal self and social self. This play is noted for the conflict which is essential to theatre. As a responsible member of his community, he (Maghai) always stands by his people and fights for their rights. So without any fear or hesitation he asks

Santosh to dig a new well for the outcastes and distribute the relief money that has been sanctioned by the centre for the outcastes:

“FIRST VILLAGER. That's not for us to say, Maghai, you speak for us.

MAGHAI. I shall. (*Sighs*) Not that it'll serve any purpose still I shall. ...

SANTOSH. What's the matter? ...

MAGHAI. ... You've collected already the government relief meant for us. Why haven't we got the money and materials yet?

SANTOSH. You will, you will, Maghai.

MAGHAI. But when? Don't you know Maatang's sister and her child have died of starvation? (102-3).

The playwright passionately emphasizes that the subalterns must protest and initiate resistance to change all this. The outsiders, even when they have good-intentions can help but not make the first move by themselves. Collective effort of community is the need of the hour. Organized group action by the people left out of the development process is the only way for them to get what is their right as citizens of India. Her belief in collective action is basically the outcome of her disillusionment with the present system. She feels that the problems of marginalized communities are not addressed in the present oppressive and corrupt system. An individual alone cannot bring any change. Hence, it becomes imperative that people unite and analyze their situation and problems, put pressure on the authorities and make a collective effort to solve them. It may be viewed that 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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