



MAHASWETA DEVI THE UNFORGETTABLE

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is one of the greatest Bengali writers. She has turned writing into a form of service to the people. She is one of the greatest social activists in India. Though she had never declared anywhere that she is a feminist or a reformer but she dedicated her life to a cause – to fight for the cause of the welfare of the tribal, the downtrodden and the under privileged. She tried hard to protect the rights of the tribes, dalits and the rural poor and the helpless women and she also strove hard for the eradication of untouchability, bonded labour, the suppression of women. She wants human treatment to dalits and tribes and women and children.

Keywords: *The tribal, The downtrodden, The under privileged, Bonded labour, Suppression of women.*

INTRODUCTION

There are writers who write for profit and fame. Writing is a commercial business in many cases, in India or outside. The role of a writer sometimes is reduced to a propagandist for selfish ends. But Mahasweta Devi occupies a unique position among Indian writers. She was and she is unique, not because of the awards she had received during her life time, but her lifetime commitment and dedication to serve the poor, the helpless and the unvoiced marginalized victims in India through her active literary production and active participation in many movements against various forms of victimization. Though she participated in the movements against the victimization of the helpless and the unvoiced marginalized victims in India mainly tribals, dalits, the working class, women, children, though the spirit of her literature address such victimization in the immediate context it can also be an inspiration to all the victimized groups in the other parts of world. As most of the third world countries are

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divided into two extreme ends. One is power and the other is poverty. The latter is always estranged and engulfed and suppressed by the former. Inequality is the main cause of marginality. As J.M. Waghmare opines:

Marginalized and indigenous people are left with fear, insecurity, exploitation and injustice. Marginalized sections of society are generally beyond the pale of the dominant culture. Their existence is, by and large, peripheral.¹

Mahasweta Devi was born in an affluent family but she had not cultivated the taste for luxury. Instead of a life of comforts she chose tough life. Her family consisted of great intellectuals and multifaceted talents. Perhaps this might be a major influence in her formation. She had never declared anywhere that she is a feminist or a reformer but she dedicated her life to a cause – to fight for the cause of the welfare of the tribal, the downtrodden and the under privileged. She redefined the role of a writer through her works. Regarding the role a writer, she said:

A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him... I desire a transformation of the present social system. After thirty one years of independence, I find myself still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. 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 for all my writings... Hence I go on writing to the best of my ability about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame.²

She was attracted to Communist ideology during her graduation. She believed that marxist path could bring about some change in the lives of the suppressed and exploited individuals. Marxism stood a guiding spirit through out her life and she did not get deviated from the path of marxist ideology. She did not use the ideology of marxism to challenge intellectuals in debates or discussions rather she practiced it through out her life. She was terminated from Indian Postal Service by the government of India on the accusation that she was a radical communist. During 1970 she was subjected to spying and policing because the government of India thought she was a naxalite. She underwent a lot of suffering because of her active participation in various movements. But she never looked back, she continued to write and she continued to fight. She produced about forty five novels and fifteen collections of short stories, ten books on children and a collection of plays. Her works were translated into many regional languages in India like Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, Punjabi, Oriya, Gujarti, Telugu,



Malayalam and Ho, a tribal language in addition to this her works have also been translated into English, Italian, French and Japanese.

Mahashwetadevi is much concerned about the plight of the tribal people. In this connection Rathod observes:

Demographically accounting for around 8.2% of the total population of India, tribals have been mercilessly marginalized by the mainstream discourse of development. Devi's work, in turn, 'produces a kind of deconstructive, counter-historical and counter-hegemonic discourse which aims to centre the subaltern'.³

About eight percent of the National population in India are tribes but unfortunately their voices remain unheard to the civilized society and the governments. They are not even allowed to retain their nativity or culture or tradition. They face a lot of pain and suffering because of the brutal intrusion of the Governments. Often they are forced to leave their home land. If they resist the orders of the government there will be inhuman atrocities on them Singur, Lalghar and Nandigram are only a few instances for the atrocities of the Government on the poor tribals. She boldly criticises the Government policies which are meant for a privilege. She foregrounds the exploitative social system by highlighting the injustices done to the tribals like Santhals, Lodhas, Mundas and Shabars, who are called upon the work for the country and the state but who are in turn being neglected and ignored both by the governments and civilised societies.

Most of the novels of Mahashwetadevi reflect women and tribal revolutionaries in their confrontation with an exploitative system. Her stories reflect the continuous struggle of women to liberate herself from the censors of the patriarchal society. She also reflects the impact of the cruel state machinery, industrialisation and unemployment on women. While treating the issues of the women she never idealizes suffering and she never romanticizes truth. She lays it bare before the readers; raw and unpolished. About the treatment of women Susie Tharu and Lalitha opined thus:

She does not regard women as a separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to the oppressions of class and caste.⁴

She does not waste her time in contemplating over the causes of the eternal suffering of women in patriarchal society. Instead of that she suggests a solution which according to her "lies in the hands of the oppressed. When they raised and fight back then only history can be changed." She believes that everyone should fight against injustice, exploitation and

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suppression rather than receiving them in silence. Her women characters like Draupadi, Sanichari, Jashoda and Dhoulai are rebels who refuse to be dispossessed, disempowered and displaced in spite of their endless sufferings at the hands of the social and political masters. Speaking about her own views as an activist as well as a writer she said:

*...I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of India which is projected by the government, to expose its naked brutality..*⁵

With the same spirit she took up the task of questioning the biased history written by the elite groups. She acknowledges the debt of main stream India to the struggles of tribals in the British and even in the pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not found in written scripts but in their songs, dances and folk tales passed from one generation to another. Therefore she re-examines the dominant nationalist history and exposes its elitist bias by focusing attention on the neglected and marginalised areas. The real nationalist heroes of India were neglected in the books of history and presented through western perspective. Therefore she articulates the erased oral history of tribal leaders and in that way she tries to establish the subalterns as real heroes in her works. In order to understand the deplorable conditions of the tribes, she travelled wide. She moved from place to place on foot and witnessed the savage impact of landlordism, a dispoiled environment, debt bondage and utter state neglect on the indigenous communities. She witnessed the same conditions in any tribal society in India. There was no education and no health care, no income, poverty, unemployment, hunger were present every where. These are some of the main issues represented by Mahasweta Devi in her novels and stories. The problems of the downtrodden and under privileged were addressed in the works such as *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)*, *Nairhite Megh (Clouds in the Southwestern Sky)*, *Bashai Tudu, Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants and Rebels, Dust on the Road* and a number of articles published in various newspapers and magazines.

The literary career of Mahasweta Devi began with *Jhansir Rani* (the queen of Jhansi). It was a first fictional reconstruction of the film *Jhansi ki Rani Laxmi bai*. She was a woman ruler of a princely state in North India, who fought against the British in 1857 in the first war of independence by the Indian people. It was followed by her second novel *Birsa Munda (Choti Munda and his Arrow)* and her third novel *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)* which established her as a great writer.

She portrayed the revolution of the people against the British rule in 1857, in the novel *Amritar Sanchay*, the novel *Titu Mir* describes the Bengal peasant revolution of 18th century. The novel *Nairhite Megh (Clouds in the Southwestern Sky)*, describes the deplorable conditions of the rural working classes in Palamu district of Bihar. The novel describe how

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the poor working class were being exploited by the feudalists. *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima (The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh)* describes the caste, class and gender exploitation. *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)* describes the great tribal revolt against the businessmen, Zamindars and the British rule under the leadership of *Birsa Munda*. The novel *Hazaar Chourasi Ma* is tremendous creation of Mahasweta Devi. It describes the anguish of the mother of twenty years old son who was killed in the naxalite movement. This novel also presents the artificial ways of life in the rich and elite society. Lack of human values, dishonesty, the ugly life of luxury, distasteful life of lust and sensuality, dependency, life of sacrifice of the youth, paternal suppression, status crises, in humanity of the selfish – all these complexities of the characters are exposed brilliantly in one day experience of the mother – sujata who had lost her twenty years son in the naxalite movement and who was in search of her son (vrati). She also raised her tirades against the patriarchal dominance in some of her novels. *Sati, Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima, Subhaga* and *Vasanta* describe the suppression of women at various levels by the state, society, family and the silent suffering of women and their resistance.

“Draupadi” or “Dopdi” is one of the most famous stories of Mahasweta Devi. It is set among the tribal in Bengal. Draupadi is a rebel, hunted down by the government. In their attempt to subjugate these groups, the government uses all possible ways including kidnapping, murder and rape, and any tribal deaths in custody are invariably ‘accidents’. But Dopdi is not easily subdued even after continuous days of rape and abuse and deprivation of food and water to her. The story ends with a shocking final scene in which she faces her abusers, naked and bloody, but fiercely strong. Regarding the character of Draupadi, Yashode says:

*Dopdi rewrites the story that tells the story of marginalized women who instantly turns herself into ‘subject: I’ from being ‘object: her’.*⁶

“Breast Giver” (Stanadayini) is the narrative of social self indulgence and apathy. Jashoda, the protagonist after her husband is crippled, becomes a wet-nurse breast-feeding and endless stream of new-born of the rich. A surrogate mother of sorts, forced by her husband and circumstances to give birth over and over again just to keep the milk flowing. The money she earns by continuously sucking babies at her milk-rich breasts keeps her own family well fed till the breasts give way to cancer and income dries up along with the milk. Jashoda rebels ironically, to succumb to breast cancer, alone breast-less, with not a single surrogate “son” to light her pyre. “The Hunt” is a straight narrative of woman who is a victim of male sexual aggression and avenges her oppressive plight by killing her oppressor. In “Douloti” the Beautiful one of Mahasweta Devi’s most probing exposures of bond slavery in India, Douloti has to pay tough life for a loan of three hundred rupees taken by her father, raising over forty thousand rupees for her masters by the time she dies at the age of twenty-seven.



Rudaali is one of the haunting novel that comes from remote villages in Rajasthan. The novel *Rudaali* analyses the mesirable life of shelterless women who take money for weeping and wailing at the dead bodies. *Rudaali* relates Sanichari's story to us in flashbacks as she reflectss on her past with her friend. Sanichari is a beautiful girl born in lower caste and her life is full of sufferings because of lower caste, poor finances, lost parents, drunken husband, and mischievous son in her old age, she has become like a stone which doesn't weep. Even a sharp eye drop that brings artificial tears in the eyes of a *Rudaali* cannot bring tears in her eyes.

Bedanabala is another interesting story. The story begins in the late 19th century, with the "theft" of a beautiful girl child from a wealthy family. She is *Bedanabala*'s mother. She grows up in the house of ill repute, to be groomed th enter the profession once she has come of age. But then, *Did'ma*, the owner of the brothel, grows to love this beautiful child as she would her own daughter and does not want her to enter this profession. She seeks for her a life of householder. But she is not allowed by society to have such decent life. "*Giribala*" is a unique work of *Mahasweta Devi*. It is an example of what human being can do when they are pushed beyond the endurance. A simple story of *Giribala* can be inspirational to any woman to calim agency to gain control over themselves and their lives.

Mahasweta Devi brought her experiences of working among tribal, particularly children, in Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat and Jharkhand in to some of her works. The book entitled "*The Why Why Girl*" is one among such works. It tells the tale of *Moyna*, a *Shabar* tribal girl, who is unable to go to school as she has to attend to house hold chores. But between tending goats and collecting firewood, this little girl, with her unbridled curiosity, keeps throwing up questions about the world around her. Her curiosity leads to her books and she finds the answers that she wants to know. *Moyna* thus embodies the spirit of inquiry and the close bond with nature that characterises most tribal children.

In this line writing "*Etoa Munda won the Battle*" is a remarkable story. *Etoa* is a native of a far remote tribal village in *Calcutta*. He had to struggle a lot to get elementary education. Education is a distant dream for the tribal children. *Etoa* losts his parents when he was a child. He is in the gaurdianship of his grand father *Mangal*. Though *Etoa* has a desire for education, due to utter poverty *Etoa* cannot go to school. *Mangal* wants him to study. But *Etoa* joined for work as a cattle keeper under the landlord *Motibabu*. Every day he drives the cattle into the forest. In his way to the forest there is a school run by a *santhali* teacher. *Etoa* stops for a while at school window to listen to the classes of the *santhali* teacher. The teacher tells the lessons of about the great tribe revolutionaries against all forms of oppression. He practices the lessons alone in the forest. Slowly he got interest in school. He left cattle keeping and joined school. But soon his grand father gets a fracture in his leg that *Etoa* has to

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drop his education in the middle He joins for cattle keeping again. In the meantime he undergoes phases of introspection. Slowly he understands the discrimination of the caste and class. He wants to root out such discrimination on his tribes. Hence he decides to rejoin in school. Though the story is a connected to a simple incident of Etoa's rejoining in school. Etoa has to undergo a lot of struggle for it. These novels and stories are a few instances for her progressive outlook and revolutionary spirit. The ultimate end of her literature is to reflect the struggle and suffering of the downtrodden and the under privileged sections in India. In order to serve such under privileged sections of people she turned herself as a social activist. She tried hard to protect the rights of the tribes, dalits and the rural poor and the helpless women. She also strove for the eradication of untouchability, bonded labour, the suppression of women. She wants human treatment to dalits and tribes and women and children. In order to create such awareness, she had started a Bengali Quarterly, Bortika (torch), which has become a forum to voice their issues. Besides her active literary production and social activism she established many organisations for the welfare of tribes and dalits. She established the Palamu Bandhuo Samati, She formed Paschim Bangla Kheirya Sabar Kalyan Samiti, a welfare society to train the tribal people to earn their livelihood in that way make them self reliant. She believes that India cannot be really independent until and unless the poor people are liberated from the chains of poverty, unemployment, ill health, malnutrition.

Mahasweta Devi has fulfilled the purpose of her life through serving the marginalised and under privileged sections of the society in India through her literature as well as practice. Like every event in her life, every word in her work is an inspiration to all Indians in general and to the prospective writers and intellectuals in particular.

*Written in Memory of Mahasweta Devi on
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