



## Mahasweta Devi's Aajir: Giving Voice to the Voiceless

### KEYWORDS

**Dr. Archana Singh**

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University Haryana, Gurgaon, India

Mahasweta Devi is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. She has written, worked and fought for the marginalized unstintingly for the past 60 years. From 1976 on, Mahasweta Devi's plays have become more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the tribals and peripheral communities like landless labourers, settled in the border region of the three adjacent province of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, especially in the districts of Medinipur, Purulia, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. She is a strange mix of an activist and a writer. Oblivion of the lime-light, she keeps on working for the well-being and progress of those whom the media and the mainstream conveniently keep overlooking. Devi's writings act as an eye opener for everyone as she records and criticizes the far-reaching consequences of the politics and the pathetic conditions for the tribal, Dalits, bonded labourers, landless peasants, women. She makes the readers hear the voice of a part of the community that is otherwise voiceless. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978), Devi explained her mission thus:

I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labor. 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 in all my writing. All the parties to the Left as well as to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my lifetime any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame. For a writer faces judgement in her lifetime and remains answerable.

Mahasweta denounces the anti-democratic policies of Independent India that keeps alive the old and rotten system of caste, creed and untouchability of denotified communities. She depicts the real picture of a post-colonial nation where subaltern is alienated from the mainstream. Thus, both society and state, through power and supremacy have attempted to curb the right and cease the existence of under privileged, even to the extent of depriving their right to life.

The pathetic condition and pain of a bonded labourer is very well visualized in the play *Aajir*, where Mahasweta has realistically penned the barbaric socio-economic realities of a person whose fore father has sold himself and his generation for a paltry amount- a slavery that denies him the right to love and marriage. As the curtain rises on a dark stage, Paatan, the 'Aajir' enters. He addresses the audience directly. He curses Golak Kura, his forefather, for intoxicating his life and forcing him to become a bonded slave.

Paatan. Sirs, my dear Sirs, I'm an aajir. Ages ago, in the hoary past, there was once a terrible famine in the tracts of our Ayodhya hills. And then...my forefather Golak Kura,

To save his life...

(pauses, then in a wail, in prose) sold himself and his wife Gairabi Dasi away for only three rupees...

He sold away all his descendants too at once... Watch, gentlemen, how

a man becomes a slave from birth. (Five Plays 45)

Scene 2 shows how Paatan, the offspring of Golak Kura suffers at the hands of Maatang, the offspring of Raavan Shunri. It shows how the bonded slave suffers generation after generation. Paatan wants to marry, he wants to have his own son, and he wants to give water to his fore fathers. A thought of getting married costs a lot to him:

Scene 2 begins with the sounds of whiplashes followed by Paatan's wofulscreams. Maatang enters the stage with a piece of cloth knotted into a whip]:

Maatang: what a body the bastard (Paatan) has... lbeathimup... He's a horrible sinner... Why does he forget he's an Aajir? His fore fathers sold him a way. He won't keep that in mind, he dreams of marrying, having a family of his own, look in gup on the face of his own son. (He spit son the ground). Is there anyone who'd give away a daughter in marriage to an aajir? (Five Plays 49-50)

Mahasweta also delineates women as a voiceless and helpless person like an Aajir. She has portrayed Mistress, the third wife of Maatang, as an unfulfilled woman who is not sexually satisfied. Mistress knows that Maatang visits Punnashashi, a prostitute in front of her without any hitch and she cannot stop him. His wealth has given him the agency over the life of Mistress and Punnashashi:

Mistress to Maatang. You're a clever fox! You tell Paatan you have his bond of slavery, and he doesn't dare run away. You tell me you've given me jewellery, you've given my father a share of cropland, you tell me you'll give me a son, you have a sop for everybody, and then you go to Punnashashi's house and dance without a stitch on your back! (Five Plays 50).

Her interest in Paatan is due to Maatang's failure in quenching her sexual thirst and a son in her lap making her a mother. Maatang interests in a prostitute -Punnas

has hicompels her to turn to Paatan. Mistress is sympathetic towards Paatan because she knows that both of them are sailing in the same boat.

Mistress to Paatan. (sighing) Enough, my dear. Let me rub you all over with liquor. (She brings out a bottle and massages him.) My body's loaded with sickness, Paatan. Your master has made an aajir of you and of me too. (Five Plays 53)

She used to meet Paatan when Maatang is not at home and makes him dream that one day he too will be able to lead the life of an independent human being and she 'll help her in destroying the slavery bond . She wants to satisfy her needs and turned to Paatan, but Paatan shows his indifference.

The Mistress: Then why don't you come closer to me?

Paatan: You'll be a mother no longer, if I come too close to you.

The Mistress: What do you feel then?

Paatan: My body's aflame.

The Mistress: What about mine? It's aflame all the time. (53)

Socio-cultural society plays a dubious role when it comes to females. Mahasweta Devi draws an excellent portrayal of the character of women, the way they are exploited and their struggle in the hands of the menfolk, at the mercy of the cultures and rituals followed blindly by the people. In scene 3 Punnashashi, the prostitute, a helpless victim of democratic nation, expresses her sentiments with the help of poetry.

Punnashashi. I have to fast the day through and then roam the night till the evening star crosses to the other end of the sky. I can't bear it any longer. They all knew what I would have to go through the next day, and yet they had to bruise me all over! (Breaks into weeping) isn't a whore's body a human body at all? You bastards, you had to tear me apart, and then I have to fast without a drop of water... (Five Plays 59)

On the other hand, the sympathy of Mistress and her promise to set Paatan free from the bond of slavery compels him to elope with her, but he knows that he cannot go any where and even cannot imagine to breathe fresh air like everyone else in the world till the bond is there.

Mistress. Come with me.

Paatan. Come! Come! Come! But where can I go? Where's there a place without a Master, without the vil-lagers, without you, with the aajir's bond?...I won't continue a family of aajirs. You bastard Golak Kura! For a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir's bond and left generations enslaved for life. I'll bring your line to an end. If there's no death from aajir's bond I'll finish it off with my death. (64)

The extreme of violence, exploitation and oppression against him is visible in his physical and mental torture and his rebellious desire to kill himself to end the bonded slavery gifted by his fore father when he says, "If there's no death from aajir's bond I'll finish it off with my death (64). And When Mistress tells Paatan that there is no bond in the chest, he panics and tries to get the keys from her. He does not allow to finish her sentence and strangulates her. When Mataang reaches the spot and tells him that he as well as his father has not seen the bond, "I thas turned to dust longa go in this gamchain which it had been once upon a time." (67). Yet Paatan fails to attain his liberty, for in his endeavour to become free, he kills Maatang's mistress, but , " he raises his head and stretches his hands out in regal dignity" (68) because now he is free from the shackles of bonded slave.

Mahasweta's work highlights the misaligned life of a down-trodden held captive under the smooth and levelled grounds, prepared by the privileged sections of society and how exploitation and neglect has reduced people to a subhuman existence. The spirit of Mahasweta Devi symbolizes her compassionate crusade through art and activism so that tribal may find a just and honorable place in India's mainstream, national life. She through Aajir pictures the reality of communities which are still very much afflicted by the cancer of the caste system. Dalits remain the most vulnerable, marginalized and coarsened community in the country. These people have suffered centuries of abuse and even today, despite legislation to protect them and an increasingly urbanised society, they are still the victims of widespread prejudice, discrimination and violence.

## REFERENCE

Arya, Shachi. Tribal Activism: Voices of Protest. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1998. Bandopadhyay, Samik. Five Plays. Calcutta: Seagull, 2008. [http://www.harmonyindia.org/hportal/VirtualPageView.jsp?page\\_id=12534](http://www.harmonyindia.org/hportal/VirtualPageView.jsp?page_id=12534) | <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/Dalits-tribals-work-as-marginal-labourers/articleshow/24896490.cms> |