



SUBALTERNS IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI

Prabal Jagadeesh
Roddannavar

Ph.D Research Scholar Karnataka University, Dharwad

ABSTRACT There are many writers who write on subalterns, yet their writings seem not as genuine as Mahasweta Devi's. What makes Devi stand different in the crowd of her contemporary writers of subalterns is her writing style, which is something unique and a very few writers have it. Her characters look real as she had been with them for many decades known them closely. Devi's long term effort to give voice to the voiceless through her activism and documentation makes her a genuine subaltern historiographer.

KEYWORDS : Subaltern, Mainstream Society, Tribals

Born and brought up in a well-to-do family, Mahasweta Devi, rather enjoying her life, chose the path to serve the subaltern community. She, in 1965, visited a district in Bihar, Palmau. Devi considers this village the mirror of India's tribal community. She witnessed cruelty of the landlords, people in debts and slavery, failure of state in improvising the conditions of the marginalized. She also noticed other villages are no exception to these things. The other side of the Independent India made aware Mahasweta Devi that why tribals were still excluded from Indian history. Her Palamau experiences come alive in her novels. *The Life And Death of Poet Bandyoghoti Gayin*, which gives the picture of a low caste boy struggling in fifteenth-century Bengal, and *Jewel in Darkness*, which is about the disturbance occurred in the life of Bengalese caused by Maratha Cavalry, *Bargi*. (Dewan 2014)

Devi's contemporary writers make her unhappy in dealing with the human suffering and the government system. For her, a writer should have social conscience towards society. She not only believed in showing the subalterns' world to the mainstream society, she actually lived with them for their well-being. Unlike her contemporary writers, she was different and bold enough to leave her comfortable life. (Dewan 2014)

To reveal the hidden world of the subalterns to the mainstream society, Mahasweta Devi uses her writing as an instrument. Recording the history of the subaltern communities is one of the main themes of Devi's writings. She has recorded the history of the Santhals, Mundas, Kurunis and other tribal communities in detail in her writings. As Spivak points out, though Devi's works are fictional, they have the 'effect of real'. "Breast-Giver"'s Jashoda, "Draupadi" and *Agnigarbha's* Draupadi, *Aranyer Adhikar's* Birsa Munda fit to the historical contexts created by Mahasweta Devi. These characters are not simply created as other writers do. Devi does give them a life in her writings after doing enough research. (Dewan 2014)

Devi's subaltern characters are strong willed and stand against their worst situations. Her major theme is voicing the voiceless subalterns through her writing. She believes in documenting even the slightest protest done against the mainstream. (Hirpara 2016)

"Draupadi" depicts the conflict between the landlords and tribals, resulting in the entry of the government system to resolve the issue. In the conflict, a tribal woman named Dopdi is caught by the armed force. She, in the name of inquiry, faces multiple rapes. As mentioned earlier, Devi's characters stand against their worst situations. Dopdi, when asked to wear dress by Senanayak, the army chief, refuses and stuns him standing naked before him. She shows her wounded breasts to Senanayak and asks him to counter her. Shocked by this unexpected resistance from a subaltern woman, Senanayak, the representative of the hegemonic power structure, stands still, unanswered. (*Breast Stories* 2014)

"Behind the Bodice" is again a story of tribal woman named Gangor, whose life becomes a disaster soon after the picture of her semi-breasts goes viral. The picture is taken by Upin Puri, a photographer who earns his livelihood by selling marginalized peoples' photographs to some national magazines. Upin earns his money by objectifying a subaltern woman. As a result, her community abandons her, the Police, the

representatives of the mainstream, capture her and rape her. The mainstream's representation of the subaltern goes wrong here. Representation turns into an object of livelihood for Upin and sexual gratification for the local Police. Devi's protagonist, Gangor, chooses to fight back. She commodifies her body and becomes a prostitute to earn money. Upin comes to save her. When he counters her, he is unanswered when Gangor shows her bitten, torn, wounded breasts; which is the doing of his photograph. When the myth of the representing the subaltern is destroyed by Gangor, Upin learns the reality and leaves the place without answering her. Later, while crossing the railway tracks, Upin is crushed by a train. (*Breast Stories* 2014)

Mahasweta Devi's "Statue" is a novella, which mocks at the government's ignorance of not hearing the subalterns' voice. The story is set in the village of Chattim, which lacks basic amenities essential for the survival of the people. The government decides to establish a statue of a freedom fighter, Dindayal Thakur, spending 74, 851 rupees which could have been spent on the development of roads, health centres, etc. (*Old Women* 2014)

"The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur" is again a story like "Statute". This focuses on the brutality of Hedo Naskar, the landlord who stops even the least help provided by the government to maintain his dominancy over the marginalized section. The story pictures the pathetic condition of a village hospital, which lacks almost everything; it has a doctor with limited knowledge, giving the same treatment to every patient irrespective of the diseases like Cholera, Tuberculosis, Typhoid, Anemia etc. The doctors from the mainstream society hesitate to enter the villages like Mohanpur, which lacks proper shelter for any outsider to reside. As there are no trained doctors, compounder and peons join to check the patients. (*Old Women* 2014)

"Witch" is a story, wherein Hanuman Misra, a representative of the mainstream society, creates a discourse of 'Witch'. He does it in a way that even Adivasi Welfare Ministry dares not to attend the issue. The dumb and deaf girl, who has been turned into witch by Hanuman Misra, is brutally attacked by her own people. She learns that to attack first is the best way to protect herself. Thus, a subaltern turns against other subalterns, the consequence of the so called mainstream discourse. (Bhowal 2018)

Mahasweta Devi's "Salt" is a story, wherein the subalterns are not heard by the mainstream society. In the story, the subalterns are seen fighting for mere salt. A rescue team comes to help the tribals. This is when the issues, instead of getting solved, grow up bigger. A youth team forces Uttamchand, the money lender, to share his crop with the tribals. Angry Uttamchand stops selling salt to the tribals. The subalterns, whom salt is essential in their food, go to the rescue team to ask to do something about the situation. The welfare team considering this a minor problem refuses to attend such issues and moves to the next village. The tribals, having seen no way, begin to exchange their chickens for salt in town. They even try to steal the black salt from the forest countering the wild animals. While stealing, they are killed by the elephants. The mainstream's attempt to represent the subalterns and hear their voice goes wrong and brings more worse to them and existed. (Bhowal 2018)

As Spivak, the translator of Devi's works, points out, the literary representation is not just enough; also, there has to be an activism, which fills the left over space. To be successful in literary representation, there has to be a practical effort. Devi's writings are the result of her experiences of being with the subaltern. (Bhowal 2018)

REFERENCES:

1. Bhowal, Sanatan. The Subaltern Speaks: Truth and Ethics in Mahasweta Devi's Fiction on Tribals. 2018.
2. Dewan, Ritu. The Concern for the Subaltern in the Plays of Mahasweta Devi. Diss. University of Jammu, 2014. sg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/73883/5/05_chapter.pdf.
3. Hirpara, Jayasukh D. Mahasweta Devi: Voice of the Subaltern. 1st ed., Anu Books, 2016.
4. Mahasweta Devi. Breast Stories. Translated by Gayatri C Spivak, Seagull Books, 2014.
5. Old Women. Translated by Gayatri C Spivak, Seagull Books, 2014.