

Mahasweta Devi: Life and Achievements

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Abstract: *This story will float over feminisms to come across the female resistance and the different mode of female struggle to identifying the female position in their location and situation. It is the part of subaltern context where female identity is rarely counted. The main focus will be to justify subaltern female identity with the referential text and It will locate the localized values of female essences rather than the modes of feminisms for political and social equality. It will try to examine whether the power bodily performance and professional mode of bodily act could define female resistance.*

Keywords: Life and Achievements', Mahasweta Devi As a Short Story Writer, Literary Currier, Translation Works, Film Based Works and Major Awards

1. Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is the leading contemporary writer in Bengali, the language of the state of West Bengal in eastern India, and of neighboring Bangladesh as well as an author of more than a hundred books, including novels, plays and collections of short stories. Translations of her into other Indian languages and into English have brought her national and international recognition. One of several modern Bengali writers committed to social and political critique from a leftist perspective, Mahasweta (the Devi in her name is a term of respect attached to a woman's name in Bengali) writes about peasants, outcastes, women, tribal's peoples who live in the forest regions of India, and other marginalized groups struggling to survive and resisting their exploitation by dominant groups. Her fiction and plays are distinguished by a powerful, direct, unsentimental style and by the subtlety and sensitivity with which she approaches the themes of struggle, resistance and empowerment.

Bengali fiction from the 1930s onward reflects the growing radicalization of various segments of Bengali society, including the rapidly growing middle class and urban poor. Since the 1920s, when share croppers revolted against landlords and the British colonial government. Bengal has been the arena of a series of peasant uprisings and unrest among the masses. The region was devastated by a man made famine in 1943. When India was partitioned in 1947, the eastern portion of Bengal (the former East Bengal) became East Pakistan, a part of the newly formed nation of Pakistan, which had been conceived as a homeland for the Muslim populations of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, the whole of Bengal was torn apart by Hindu Muslim communal riots and the massive displacement of populations. Exploited as much in independent India as in the colonial era, the Munda and other tribal peoples in Bengal and the neighboring state of Bihar rose in revolt, and in the 1960s urban students participated in peasant and tribal struggles in a movement known as the Naxalbari movement (after the village where it began), only to be brutally suppressed by the Bengal state government. Yet another upheaval was caused by East Pakistan's proclamation of Independence from Pakistan as the new nation of Bangladesh in 1970. Mahasweta and other major Bengali writers such as Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956) and Hasan AzizulHuq (born 1938), have responded to these

events with fiction that shifted the focus of modern Bengali literature from the lives of the educated, urban middle class to the educated, urban middle class to the politics of the exploitation of the under classes.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the prolific contemporary Indian writers. Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali writers who traverses the diverse worlds of fiction, history, journalism, socio-political activism with equal élan, embodies and expands the tradition of politically active creative literature in India.

She travels to remote tribal regions of India, gets an experiential understanding of the harsh living realities of the indigenous masses, forms and leads number of grassroots organizations to fight against oppression and to root for justice, writes journalistic reports on exploitation and expropriation, deprivation and degradation, edits journals carrying subaltern voices and translates the issues and the people she is concerned about into the narratives and characters of her fiction. Thus fundamentally distinct as the spheres of her activity may seem on the surface, these are in fact organically interrelated and together constitute her literary perspective and its politics/poetics.

Mahasweta Devi has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies in this country. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities was a first of its kind. Her powerful, haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse by leading scholars. Her innovative use of language has expanded the conventional borders of Bengali literary expression.

Mahasweta Devi has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies in this country. Standing as she does at the intersection of vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class, she is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature.

Mahasweta Devi quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, yet her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work. But Mahasweta, like a subaltern, is scrupulous in her consideration towards women. In other words, she does not regard women as separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to the oppressions of class and caste. The women characters in her

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works are stronger when compared to men. The men appear to be lacking in insight into what is happening to their being, and remain, for a moment, passive spectators as their counterparts pass through the trying situation created by an equally indifferent establishment. She stands with few equals among today's Asian writer in the trying dedication and directness with which she has turned writing into a form of service to the people.

Mahasweta Devi, a writer, a social activist and a freelance journalist was born on January 14, 1926 in Dhaka, now Bangladesh. After her birth her parents moved to West Bengal, India. The aspect that makes Devi different from her predecessors and the contemporary writers is her sincere commitment and strong will-power in supporting the suffering masses, especially the tribal's and women. "Breast-Giver" translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivakand collected in *Breast-Stories* represents breast as a commodity of consumption. Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman is paid for breast-feeding the grandsons of Haldar's – a rich and prosperous Brahmin family. In the course of time, she begins to suffer from breast cancer and dies a destitute.

As a realist entrenched in subaltern consciousness, Mahasweta ideally should puncture and deflate the grand-narratives or structural tyranny of allegories. Allegory is possible only at the cost of the marginal and the subaltern. Should "Breast Giver" or "Mother of 1084" be taken as allegories of oppression? Or should they be taken as chronicles of individuals? Can mutually incompatible ingredients like history, ideology, realism, allegory be sustained in one organic whole? Mahasweta fiction is a crucible in which all these elements coalesce into a narrative which is discursive, allegorical, real and historically verifiable at the same time. True it is that she does not do away with story/narrative altogether, but her's-story (as against his's-story) has the potential to rip apart the canonical imperial narrative from within.

The colonial and patriarchal discourses that are largely premised upon series of binary opposition such as colonized, imperialism, nationalism, man woman public private center periphery produce a violent hierarchy. In this hierarchy, the colonized, the marginalized culture the women are branded as a deviant disruptive group both socially and culturally. In such binarism, one term forcefully governs the other. Mahasweta fiction aims at inverting such hegemonic over-privileged, ever signifying system of relationships and attempts to bring low what was high through the strategies of subversion and reversion and reversal. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures generating aesthetics of opposition in the process.

The subaltern groups are always subject to the dominance of the other, even when they rebel and rise up According to the subaltern school of historians. Indian history has always been dominated by elitism. It has originated as an ideological product of the ruling elite. And so it attributes all the major achievements in the history of the Indian nation to the elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas. Ranajit Guha calls the history of Indian nationalism "a sort

of spiritual biography of the Indian elite". According to him this kind of historical writings are prejudiced as these fail to acknowledge and explain the contribution made by the masses. The subalternists problematic the ideological appropriation of history and make an attempt to highlight the contribution of the subordinate classes and groups in the making of history. Mahasweta fictional narratives are very close to sub alternist nation of historiography.

The breast is a source of food and a livelihood. Jashoda is paid to breast feed the many children in the extended family of her Master and Mistress. Her abundant milk supports her own crippled husband and family. The names of the characters are not casually chosen – Jashoda is the mother of Krishna. There are many layers to these stories and therefore many interpretations each reading may reveal, and each reader may discover, a different slant.

The final story in this collection was perhaps the least intriguing, focusing on a respectable middle class photographer up in, who is fascinated by the lovely breasts of a tribal woman, Gangor.

Devi's stories are remarkable for their complete lack of sentimentality. The hard life stories of the tribal's who are oppressed by the money lenders and landlords, condescended to do by the government, aided in uselessly in appropriate ways by charity groups and well-meaning city people, are described in her distinctively matter of fact style. The history of the region is integral to many stories, but it is taken for granted and never explained. Many readers may miss the finer details of the classes and cultures but will still be shaken by the stories themselves

Standing as she does at the intersection of vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class. She is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. Recognizing this, we have conceived a publishing programmer which encompasses a representational look at the complete. Her novels, her short fiction, her children's stories, her plays, her activist prose writings. The series is an attempt to introduce her impressive body of work to a readership beyond Bengal; it is also an overdue recognition of the importance of her contribution to the literary and cultural history of our country.

The preceding statement amply illustrates Mahasweta Devi's literary enterprise and its constituent elements .she defines literature as a 'responsible' act that originates from the historical commitments of the writer. These historical commitments necessitate literature to be written from a certain political stand so as to strive towards its aim of achieving the transformation of the unjust social system. In short, literature for her is a powerful, political committed statement in favor of the subaltern. Her creative writings transcend the bounds of literariness and present themselves as powerful socio-political and historical tracts.

Mahasweta concerns, obviously, align her with the subaltern and their existential dilemmas. For her, literature is a recuperative act- it involves the recuperation of the subaltern form the abyss of silence and misery. The final aim of this recuperation is the insertion of the subaltern voice, their

experiences and emotions, world view and realities-into the mainstream. Writing, for her, is a creative act, a 'brave' act that helps her transcend the "sense of shame or guilt". Mahasweta literary oeuvre is poised on the aesthetic tripod of creation, critique, and conditioning. This three-fold narrative agenda entails an unavoidable intervention into the conventional canonicity through the strategies of confrontation, expansion, inversion, and renovation.

Mahasweta fiction is not fantasy, nor is it a pastoral romance. It is firmly rooted in the ground reality, in the solidity of facts. Detailed documentation goes into the making of the narrative. What redeems her ideological biases is this anchoring in facts, empirical and material truths of life. She does not take a tangential view of reality for as a hard core realist, she believes fiction must stem from actual, historical facts. Authenticity of fiction is the first condition for its effective application for activist purposes. Mahasweta fiction begins with a fact profile of either an area or a character or a local practice, before it snowballs into a gripping story. In Agnigarbha for instance, the corpse of Santali farmer quite metaphorically begins to simmer with fire threatening the very survival of Feudalism. Myth as a classical, predetermined, pre-historic given discourse has been questioned and qualified by Mahasweta in many of her fictional narratives. Mahasweta employs the critical trope of irony to dislocate/invert the mythical which serves as the discursive exposition of the given knowledge while exposing contemporary hierarchical hegemonic structures. Mahasweta invokes the mythical to expose the hegemonies written within such narratives. A consistent problem tiding expanding and revising of myth characterizes the poetics of her resistant writing. She explores the sites, modes and extent of resistance within the economies of myth.

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to literary parents. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a well-known poet and novelist of the Kallol movement, who used the pseudonym Jubanashwa. Ghatak's youngest brother was noted film maker Ritwik Ghatak. Mahasweta's mother, Dharitridevi, was also a writer and a social worker whose brothers were very distinguished in various fields, such as the noted sculptor Sankha Chaudhary and the founder – editor of the Economic and Political weekly of India, Sachin Chaudhary. Mahasweta's first schooling was in Dhaka, but after the partition of India she moved to West Bengal in India. She joined the Rabindranath Tagore founded Vishvabharati University, in Santiniketan and completed a B.A (Hones) in English and then finished an M.A in English at Calcutta University. She later married renowned play Wright Bijon Bhattacharya, who was one of the founding fathers of the IPTA movement. In 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, one of Bengal's and India's leading novelists, whose works have been noted for their intellectual vigor and philosophical flavor. She got divorced from Bijon Bhattacharya in 1959.

In 1964, she began teaching at Bijoygarh College (an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta system). During those days, Bijoygarh College was an institution for working class women students. During that period she also worked as a journalist and as a creative writer. Recently, she is more famous for her work related to the study of the

Lodhasand Shabars, the tribal communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. She is also an activist who is dedicated to the struggles of tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal peoples and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper caste land lords, lenders and venal government officials. She has written of the source of her inspiration.

- I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations..... The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing.

At this is truly the age where the Joota (shoe) is Japane (Japanese), Pat loon (plants) is Englistani (British), the Topi (hat) is Roosi (Russian), but the Dil.....Dil (heart) is always Hindustani (Indian)..... My country, Torn, Tattered, Proud, Beautiful, Hot, Humid, Cold, Sandy, Shining India. My country.

Postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak has translated Devi's short stories into English, most notably the 1995 collection *Imaginary Maps*, published by Rout ledge.

Mahasweta Devi as A Short Story Writer:

She started writing at a young age, and contributed short stories to various literary magazines. Recently, she is more famous for her work related to the study of the Lodhas and Shabars, the tribal Communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. She is dedicated to the struggles of tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal peoples and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper caste, landlords, lenders and venal government officials. She's won several awards for both her fiction and her journalistic work. I have always believed that real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generation..... the reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat.

I finished a short story collection by Devi a while back, and was quite impressed. It mostly consisted of stories she wrote in the 70's – Fishermen, Breast giver, The Hunt, The Statue and a few others. This is pissed – off literature; Devi writes about the tribal and castles people in the Bengal region who, she claims, have fallen through the cracks in modern independent India – and none fall further than the women, it's certainly a far cry from the romanticized take of slum dog Millionaire – with her Sober, seemingly objective reporter's eye that still retains a hint of oral tradition, as if to point out that these are stories that have been going on for

centuries, she chronicles the way the weak kick downwards with much the same disillusionment and righteous anger as, say, Ngugiwa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*. Just steps in and chronicles the lives of her characters; the fisherman who's working for the police, pulling bodies out of the river and not saying anything about the truncheon marks on them; the girl who executes her would-be rapist and dances all night; the holy Indian mother who breast feeds entire generations of.

Maitreya Ghatak, "The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger...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".

2. Literary Currier

Devi, according to an interview in the book I'm currently reading, claims to have written "Somewhere between 100 and 150" books from children's books to novels, "about 30 of which are good". Wikipedia provides the following rather messy list.

Mahasweta Devi's work, *Jhansi Rani*, was a fictional reconstruction of *laxmibai*, the picture of women ruler who died fighting the British Author army in the mid-nineteenth century. Several of her other early works such as *Amrita Sanchy* (1964) and *Andhanmalik* (1967) are also set during the British colonial period. The naxalite movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's were also an important influence in her work. Devi, in a 1983 interview, points to this movement as the first major event that she felt "an urge and an obligation to document" (Bandyopanday 8). This leftist militant movement attracted participation from student group. Devi's *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1804) is the story of an upper middle class woman whose world forever changed when her son is killed for his Naxalite beliefs. This book has recently been made into a Hindu-language movie called *Hazar Chaurasiki Maa* by director Govind Nihalani.

So for Mahasweta Devi has published more than 94 works of fiction which include novels, short stories and plays. The most important among them are,

- The Queen of Jhansi (biography, translated in English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta from the 1956 first edition in bangle *Jhansir Rani*).
- *Hajar Churashir Maa* ("Mother of 1084", 1975; translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay, Seagull Books, 1997).
- *Bitter Soil*, Ipsita Chandra, Seagull, 1998. Four stories.
- *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Occupation of the Forest, 1977).
- *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire, 1978).
- *Choti Mundaevam Tar* (Choti Munda and His Arrow, 1980).
- *Imaginary Maps* (translated by Gayatri Spivak London).
- *Dhowli* (short story).
- *Dust on the Road* (translated into English by Maitreya Ghatak, Seagull, Calcutta).
- *Our Non-Veg Cow* (Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1998, Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee).

- *Dakatey kahini*.

Translation Works

- After *kurukshetra*: Three stories. Trans. AnjumKatyul. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005).
- *The Armenian Champa Tree*. Trans. Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998.
- *Bedanabala*. Trans. Sunadini Bannerjee. Calcutta. Seagull Books, 2005.
- *Bait*: Four stories. Trans. Sumanta Bannerjee. Calcutta. Seagull Book, 2004.
- "Bhikhari Dusad or the Fundamental Right". Trans. Mahasweta Devi, *Polygraph* 4 (1990).
- *Dewana Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree*. Trans. Pinky Bhattacharya. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004.
- *Romtha: the Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi*. Trans. Pinky Bhattacharya. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
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- "Salt". *Protest: An Anthology of Bengali short stories of the 70,s*. Ed. Partha Chatarjee. Trans. Tapan Mitra. Calcutta: Achintya Gupta, 1981.
- "Seeds". Trans. Mahasweta Devi. *Panorama: Anthology of Modern Indian Short Stories*. Eds. Mulk Raj Anand and S. BaluRao. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private limited, 1986, pp. 20-43

Film Based Works

- *Sunghursh* (1968), based on her story, which presented a fictionalized account of *Vendetta* within a thug gee cult in the city of Varanasi.
- *Rudaali* (1998). *MaatiMaay* (2006), based on short story, *Daayen*.
- *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa* (1998).

Major Awards

- 1979 – Sahitya Academy Award (Bengali) *Aranyer Adhikar* (novel).
- 1986 – Padma Shri.
- 1996 – Jnanpitha Award: the highest literary award from the Bharatiya Jnanpitha.
- 1997 – Ramon Magsaysay Award: Journalism. Literature and the government of India.
- 2010 – Yaswantrao Chavan National Award.
- 2011 – Bangabibhushan: the highest civilian award from the government of West Bengal.
- 2012 – Hall of fame lifetime Achievement Sahityabramha: the first lifetime achievement award in Bengali literature from 4th Screen – IFJW.
- Mahasweta Devi's work, *Jhansi Rani*, was a fictional work, reconstruction of *laxmibal*, the picture of women ruler who died fighting the British Author army in the mid-nineteenth century.

3. Conclusion

In this way this story will float over feminisms to come across the female resistance and the different mode of female struggle to identifying the female position in their location and situation. It is the part of subaltern context where female identity is rarely counted. The main focus will be to justify subaltern female identity with the referential

text of Mahasweta Devi's story, 'Standayani (Breast Giver)' as a representational art. It will locate the localized values of female essences rather than the modes of feminisms for political and social equality. It will try to examine whether the power bodily performance and professional mode of bodily act could define difference of female resistance or not. I will be trying to explore the various frame works of female struggle and modes identity formation with Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Giver' which I will be interchangeably using for 'Standayani.' It is localized version of female study with subaltern references and female study. Subaltern Female study could lead a different mode for study where rather than looking at binary positions of male/female, we study them with their own narratives. In this paper, it will be attempted that the growth of those people who are conscious on their ways of living without being compared to higher class of people. I will be looking at the position of other marginalized females and their attempt to hold the position to compare and contrast subaltern females and their collectiveness. I will be referring the subaltern female of Mahasweta Devi's 'Standayani' as my primary source whereas theoretical modes will be taken from Spivak, Gramsci.

Here is mode of feminist study will be re-reading female identity with reference to subaltern female position. Subalternity could be analyzed as marginalized or 'other' figure as their essence is under shadow. They are not visible in the space of center or main stream. In this context they grow with their own stories and narratives which collaborate build their values. I have tried to explore the power of resistance and bodily acts of those shadowed females. It is reflected in their manner of acceptance and the collective consciousness in regard to their social position. Mahasweta Devi's 'Standayani' and "The Five Women" are the text to refer and justify the mode of subaltern female identity.

Such process has not addressed female sufficiently. There the group of female gets lost whom no one had identified in their social location. Even though, Woolf attempted to redefine feminism with the concept of androgynous figure where, neither existing masculinity nor tradition femininity played role to figure out female. But, in this progress of perceiving female as such, feminism to new dimension of female on her own room.

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