

## **MAHASWETA DEVI AND HER VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS**

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### ***Abstract***

*The proposed paper analyses how Mahasweta Devi raises her voice against the social system through her writings and thus gives potency to the causes of tribals and women. Society as a broad phenomenon consists religions and state which includes bureaucracy and police as its main agencies and private sector which has builders and moneylenders (financiers) as its important components.*

*In the works of Mahasweta Devi one can notice a scathing attack on society and its exploiting agencies. She prefers to talk about these aspects to give expressions to the depriving experiences of exploitation, socio-economic-political degradation, suffering from poverty, discrimination and social stigma of the marginalised.*

*Mahasweta Devi exposes the callous face of society through her works by dealing with the exploitation of the adivasis by the landed rich or the urban administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity, bonded labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of the city dwellers, the plight of women, dependent widows and ill-treated wives.*

*Mahasweta Devi gives her voice to her characters by showing us the struggle, resistance, effort, rebellion, will to retaliate and queer techniques of the unprivileged for the survival in the midst of all deprivation.*

**Key Words:** *potency, bureaucracy, scathing attack, exploiting agencies, depriving experience, discrimination, marginalised, callous face, ill-treated wives, will to retaliate.*

## MAHASWETA DEVI AND HER VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

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Many writers have chosen literature as a weapon to raise their voice against society for the voiceless. One such writer is Mahasweta Devi. She is a writer who brings in her works the problems of tribal and women and tries to give a strong voice for them.

From 1976 on, Mahasweta Devi has become more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the tribal and under- privileged communities settled in the border regions of the three neighbouring states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Mahasweta Devi has a special place in her heart for the tribals and other marginalised sections of our society. She writes about the exploited and the exploiter.

She has brought to light the important but disregarded events in her works, tried to speak of the degraded people. She observes in an interview to Amar Mitra and Sabyasachi Deb, 'As people go to pilgrimage, I went to the tribals. We, the so called people of mainstream get everything, but the tribals had nothing' (168). Mahasweta Devi's anger is directed not only against the exploiters but also against the complacent mainstream.

Even in 'Independent India', Mahasweta Devi found the people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness, and bonded labour. Anger directed against a system that has failed to liberate the people from these horrible constraints, is the main source of inspiration for all her writing. One would not doubt her social responsibility. Samik Bandyopadhyay cites a part of her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (translated as *Womb of Fire*) where she writes, 'A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him...' (viii).

Mahasweta Devi has been instrumental in the setting up of several voluntary organisations among the tribal and other oppressed communities. She has often helped them bring their grievances and demands to the view of the generally indifferent bureaucracy and set of movements for the redress of different modes of exploitation.

Three modes of power which make the subaltern suffer play a vital role in Mahasweta Devi's fiction. Mahasweta Devi vividly delineates how the subaltern are being crushed under these modes of power. These are:

1. Communal mode of Power: Communal authority may be exercised through a council of elders or of leading families, or even by a chief or patriarch. Examples: "Witch", "Bayen".
2. Feudal mode of Power: It is characterized fundamentally by sheer superiority of muscle power, that is, a relationship of domination. Examples: "Seeds", "Water".

3. Bourgeois mode of Power: Here, unlike the feudal, there is the domination of non-producers, that is, capitalists, over the producers, that are wage labourers through impersonal operation of the market. Example: "Salt".

Mahasweta Devi clearly exposes how exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class/gender held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defenses for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy and ignorance of the exploited.

Mahasweta Devi does not simply delineate the destitute being exploited by the so-called elite. If she had stopped there itself, it would have been like unveiling only one face of the subaltern life. Anybody could have done that. But Mahasweta Devi's greatness lies in the fact that she penetrates into the minds of the subaltern and subtly brings out their sentiments, emotions, frustrations, anger, patience, helplessness, cunningness, schemes, sense of rebellion, will to retaliate, etc. She unravels the inner layers of the marginalised people's lives. The typical relationship between the different members of community, of family is exhibited vividly. The habits, superstitions, life styles, and beliefs of the tribals are drawn very convincingly. The struggle, resistance, effort and queer techniques of the unprivileged for survival in the midst of all the deprivation portrayed in her writings enable one to know more about the subaltern. Thus both material and mental conditions of the subalterns have been described in her fiction.

One may ask questions such as whether the tribal folk go through her readings, whether they know a person called Mahasweta Devi is taking pains for their cause. Yes. The tribals have read her writings and have known her. As Mahasweta Devi herself puts it letters bring to her the reaction of tribals from far regions. It is also said that in an area of Midnapur district, the Mundas have composed a song on Mahasweta Devi. The words of the song are—"Mahasweta Devi has brought Brisa back again".

One should not label Mahasweta Devi as a writer who has focused only on tribals and women and has shunned other problems of the country. In fact she has concern for every human being. She states in an interview to Samik Bandyopadhyay,

Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game. For me, all political programmes and creed should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics (viii).

Though Mahasweta Devi chooses tribals and women as the subject of her writing she is seriously concerned about other ailments of our society. She feels that the cities are not free. Under growing unemployment, soaring prices and an archaic educational system, the middle class is fast losing its balance and going over the other class, sharpening in the process of class struggle.

Mahasweta Devi has written not only about the marginalised in villages but also about those who support or fight for the cause of the downtrodden. In this regard she quotes an incident from her life. One evening two young men came to her, they waited at the balcony, and asked her that she had written about the villages, but who would write about them, who were in the

cities(Amar Mitra 167). The result was *HajarChurasir Ma (Mother of 1084)*. As she herself says whenever she wrote about destruction of forests atPalamau, of the problems of the tribals, she spoke of the people of India.

Let us look how Mahasweta Devi's concern for the marginalized is embedded in her writing. In her works she focuses on how religion, superstitions, poverty, ignorance, capitalistic landlords and moneylenders further aggravate the plight of the marginalised. Her concern for the oppressed can be seen in her explanation of the causes and consequences of their (the deprived) exploitation, resistance and efforts to survive.

Whether it is the story of DulanGanju or Purtimunda or the Kubha villagers who are on the run or of Sanichari or Chandidasi or Draupadi or Gangor or Chinta or BashaiTudu or Jashoda, Mahasweta Devi portrays it poignantly. Each character and its exploiter become the representative of their kind. Mahasweta Devi is very sympathetic towards these tribal and marginalized persons and is very angry and ironical towards the upper class and dominant male characters such as Lachman Singh, Hanuman Misra, DibyanathChatterjee, Uttamchand and the like. Mahasweta Devi is disgusted at democracy, administration, government and society. In *BashaiTudu* she writes ironically,

In a democracy the government would never violate the fundamental rights of a small peasant to be victimized by his jotedar or his moneylender. The Indian constitution respected every citizen's fundamental right to become whatever he could by dint of his guts. The poor therefore had the right to become poorer still. A peasant today had the right to be a landless agricultural labourer tomorrow (87).

In "Seeds" Mahasweta Devi feels pity towards persons like DulanGanju who has to undergo mental upheaval due to LachmanSingh, the zamindar who is portrayed as villain. DulanGanju puts up with many cruelties of Lachman Singh only because the former considers the latter as his saviour. Mahasweta Devi seems to justify the idea that the suppressed will not leave the suppressor when DulanGanju kills Lachman Singh after undergoing long suffering. She also supports the idea that the oppressor must be punished though the ways of punishment differ. "The Witch" which is based on the superstitious beliefs of the tribals shows how the religious heads like Hanuman Misra fuel the fear of the tribals to save their skin.

While *Bitter Soil* expresses Mahasweta Devi's concern for tribal as subaltern, *Breast Stories* deals with women as subaltern, both tribal and non-tribal. "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice" deal about tribal women while "Breast-Giver" non-tribal woman. Mahasweta Devi here focuses on the male dominance in the exploitation of female. She subtly and symbolically suggests how women are used according to man's selfish intentions, more often by force.

Mahasweta Devi depicts in "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice" how tribal women are ill-treated and molested by men of government and private contractors. She is concerned here mainly about the causes which have brought these women to intolerable conditions. She is interested in the reasons behind Draupadi's becoming a rebel. Likewise she also focuses on Gangor's financial conditions which compel her to migrate as a labourer and thus to be gang raped in the police station and by the contractors. She attacks the Senanayak, the police and the

contractors who treat these women inhumanly. She makes her characters to do this kind of attack.

“Breast-Giver” is about a Hindu Brahmin’s wife Jashoda who becomes a wet-nurse to the children of Haldar family. Mahasweta Devi, besides dealing with some aspects of breast cancer, focuses on how poor women like Jashoda are used by many agencies (like the Haldar family and her husband Kangalicharan) until they are useful and then are thrown away. She attributes this to poverty, religion and patriarchal set up of our society.

*Mother of 1084* shows that Mahasweta Devi rises her voice not only for tribals and the poor but also for persons like Sujata who suffer in families which are economically sound. Sujata feels alone though she has two sons, two daughters and husband. No one except Brati cares for her. In spite of having a job at a bank she is not happy. Her suffering becomes more severe after Brati’s death. Her husband Dibyanath who has extra marital relations continuously neglects her.

In spite of the fact that Mahasweta Devi believes in documentation her fiction forms a part of great literature. She not only documents the situations but narrates them in such a way that the stories arouse the reader’s curiosity and provoke him to ponder over several issues as they move on.

Thus the writings of Mahasweta Devi throw light on a wide area of society. Domestic life, social life, political life and economic life of human beings are dealt with in her works. Life of similarity and contrast makes one think seriously about life. Man has a lot to learn from another man. Everyone, including the rich, should try to eliminate the differences between the haves and the have-nots. The rich, the male and those who are in ‘power’ should understand the plight of the poor, the female and the neglected section of society and should work for their uplift. Until man does not learn to treat woman with equality and the rich and the powerful do not stop exploiting the poor and the ‘weak’.

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