

UNVEILING THE TRIBAL HISTORY OF MUNDAS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S

CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi as an author and a historian is committed to write a subaltern historiography because she sincerely intends to question the power structure that has inhibited and silenced the subalterns. Subaltern History which accounts for the unacknowledged and often misinterpreted history of masses is in a dire need of rectification. The subalterns being the communities who have been deprived of the right to agency, can only be rehabilitated if their history and hence their existence is returned to them. The onus of a subaltern historian in this social endeavour is to actively attempt to revisit the distorted histories, rectify them and reclaim the legitimate and authentic past of the subalterns. The work considered in the novel is a testament to the significance of subaltern history which if tampered with endangers a community on the whole. The work intends to give voice to the tribals- Mundas whose history has been criminalised and exploited to suppress and dehumanize them. The author Mahasweta Devi, in her spirit of situating a subaltern history, has time and again asserted, "I have always been driven by a strong sense of history... (and) In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view (The Queen of Jhansi, 321). The work Chotti Munda and His Arrow brings the Fourth World on the map of India, and champions to revive their history that is authentic and bona fide.

Keywords: Subaltern, History, Tribal, Mahasweta Devi

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"Mahasweta articulates tribal history with colonial and postcolonial history...one of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of the subaltern speech"

(Spivak, *Chotti Munda*, vii-viii)

Subaltern History which accounts for the unacknowledged and often misinterpreted history of masses is in a dire need of rectification. The subalterns being the communities who have been deprived of the right to agency, can only be rehabilitated if their history and hence their existence is returned to them. The onus of a subaltern historian in this social endeavour is to actively attempt to revisit the distorted histories, rectify them and reclaim the legitimate and authentic past of the subalterns. The work considered in the novel is a testament to the significance of subaltern history which if tampered with endangers a community on the whole. The work intends to give voice to the tribals- Mundas whose history has been criminalised and exploited to suppress and dehumanize them. The author Mahasweta Devi, in her spirit of situating a subaltern history, has time and again asserted, "I have always been driven by a strong sense of history... (and) In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view (*The Queen of Jhansi*, 321). The work *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* brings the Fourth World on the map of India, and champions to revive their history that is authentic and bona fide.

Mahasweta has attacked the elitist renditions of subaltern history that has silenced the entire indigenous community of the tribals from existence. It is an ideological and a socio-political stratagem to hijack history and replace it with a Eurocentric and bourgeois-

centric record of history. Spivak calls this, 'a process of epistemic violence' and that 'history is not simply a disinterested production of facts... (but) an interested construction...with no reality outside its representation" (*White Mythologies*, 200). The assertion is how the history is intentionally narrativized with fabrications to suit a hidden agenda of colonial or postcolonial ramification. To check this surge of false histories and criminal representations, Mahasweta has in the novel attacked the shocking obliteration of knowledge about the tribals, and has developed an epistemology that is of and for the Fourth World. Mahasweta has explored this knowledge with an ethical integrity as has been vehemently declared by her:

I have always believed the real history is made by ordinary people... in various forms of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people...the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human veins...my writing is really their doing" hence asserting that the subaltern is infact the maker of his own history

(*Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels*, 24)

In the Indian context, the national bourgeoisie intensifies the divide between the elite and the subaltern as has been analyzed by Kancha Illaiah's in her subversive book *Why Am I Not A Hindu*(1998) where she highlights the marginalization of 'dalitbahujans' who 'form the exploited and suppressed majority in India'(ix). Illaiah observes the sentiment of these backward castes and the extent of the unawareness of the mainstream about these subalternized classes:

What difference did it make to us we had an English textbook...or a Telugu textbook...We do not share the content of either, we do not find our lives reflected in their narratives. we cannot locate our family setting in them....How does it make any difference to us whether it is Greek and Latin that are written in Roman letters or Sanskrit that is written in Telugu?

(*Why Am I Not A Hindu*, 15)

Further Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Post-colonialism*(2005) remarks that these low castes were dehumanized by the colonizers in the colonial India and are meted out with the

same treatment by the Hindu elites of post-colonial India. It is a mortifying fact that the tribals are not considered citizens of the country and if they are then the rights and privileges of a citizen are not provided to them. The Fourth World of tribals in India have been conveniently erased from the map owing to elitist narrativizing of history that leaves no space for the voice of the tribals to be heard and recorded. To effectively right this wrong, Mahasweta has methodically exposed this travesty of India:

Globalization is not only coming from America and first world, my own country has always wanted to rob the people...The tragedy of India at independence was not introducing thorough land reform. A basic feudal land system was allowed to stay... A feudal value system is anti-women, anti-poor people, against toiling people.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xv)

It is pertinent to note that Mahasweta in this endeavour as highlighted above, has taken into consideration the elite as well as the subaltern model of historiography. In her doing so, she has presented a dialogic mode of history writing which weighs the reality as told by official narratives and native histories. It is pivotal to note that Edward Said in his Foreword to *Subaltern Studies* has also affirmed this claim. He has warned against the separatism of subaltern historiography from the discourses of the elitist history. It would, according to him, seclude the field to a narrow and limited avenue of study and dialogue:

...if subaltern history is constructed to be only a separatist enterprise-much as early feminist writing was based on the notion that women had a voice or a room of their own, entirely separate from the masculine domain-then it runs the risk of just being a mirror opposite the writing whose tyranny it disputes. It is also likely to be as exclusivist, as limited, provincial and discriminatory in its suppressions and repressions as the master discourses of colonialism and elitism. In fact as Guha shows, the subaltern is an integrative knowledge...the whole experience...

(*Selected Subaltern Studies*, viii)

Hence in agreement of this claim, Mahasweta Devi has ventured to place side by side the elite history and the Fourth World history, to eventually forge an authentic record of the aboriginals in India. In the foreword to *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002, viii), Gayatri Spivak has enunciated this cardinal objective of Mahasweta Devi. Spivak asserts, "Mahasweta articulates tribal history with colonial and postcolonial history...one of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of the subaltern speech" (*Chotti Munda*, vii-viii). The milieu of the novel sketched around the village of Chotti is a symbol of 'tribal aspiration' in the face of overwhelming odds of prejudice and disenfranchisement. In her fictional world, Mahasweta has exhorted the readers to recognize and protest the inhuman manners of oppression dealt to the tribal masses. She exclaims;

These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script...this is unwritten history. I had to learn it by being with the people. They compose the stream of events into song. ..their history is like a big flowing flower going somewhere, not without a destination. ..tribal world is like a continent handed over to us, and we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xi)

Mahasweta has challenged the deliberate discrimination and exclusion of the tribal masses. Tribal masses were cut off from their freedom struggle, and in their coerced seclusion, significant events of their history was unknown to them. Hence it is obvious they did not get liberated from feudalism when the country was liberated from the British. In fact it was a sinuous subterfuge of the Indian nationals to use and throw the tribal masses when they deemed fit. They mobilized the low castes to wage a united front against the colonials but deep down were so suspicious of the tribal masses to materialize this unity. Partha Chatterjee in her essay, "The Nation and its Peasants" (2000) has effectively traced this relationship:

...nationals leadership sought to mobilize the peasantry as an anticolonial force in its project of establishing a nation-state, it was ever distrustful of the consequences of agitational politics among the peasants, suspicious of their supposed ignorance and backward

consciousness, careful to keep their participation limited to the forms of bourgeois representative politics in which peasants would be regarded as a part of the nation but distanced from the institutions of the state. ..the unity remained fragmented and fraught with tension (in the struggle against colonialism).

(Mapping Subaltern Studies, 10)

Mahasweta reaffirms this mainstream sentiment in the novel:

The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that the Diku's (Hindu) struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They didn't draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, 121)

The above reality is a shocking evidence of the treatment that has been meted out to the Fourth World of Indian aboriginals. Hence it becomes even more necessary to combat this discrimination and rehabilitate the indigenous communities of India lest they are forgotten. Mahasweta asserts how the tribal masses have retaliated against the insidious abuse of the ruling class. If one is to chart the history of tribals, one would embark on a track of rebellions which were suppressed so that the reign of terror could continue for the profit of colonial and nationalist expansion. The author has witnessed the brutality up-close, and her details expose the racial discrimination met by the natives. She has narrated the prominent revolts as 'Mulkui', 'Telengana-Girijan', 'Ulgulan', 'Tebhaga' etc and each are testimonies of the agrarian movements raged against the tyranny of landlords and native/foreign administration. Mahasweta hence has portrayed three timelines which visited the village of Chotti. She has exposed the hierarchies of race that originated in the feudal India, were consolidated during colonial Empire and which continue to resurrect itself in the capitalist India. The author has documented a tribal history which time and again protested these totalitarian forces. Some of the tribal protested with a revolt, while some used the peaceful means of petitions to voice their suppression. In her allegiance to the continuing struggle of the tribal masses, Mahasweta writes:

When, in the 60's, I would go to Munda villages, their marketplaces...I have seen with my own eyes what Emergency meant, what was done. The criminalization of politics, letting the lumpen loose in the lower caste and tribal belts. Inhuman torture and oppression. I have also seen resistance...Chotti Munda or my other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle...Tribal History is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography...the tribal masses are still evicted from their land...the first Santal Rebellion was Baba Tirka Majhi's rebellion...(then) Birsa's uprising and of Dhani Munda...yet after each rebellion-always relate to land and labour-they were evicted from their home places.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, ix)

Feudalism persevered in India, for it garnered profits for the landlords who sought an opportunity in this medieval arrangement. David Hardiman explores various texts to corroborate that this system originated in the pre-colonial past. Under the British rule, the system underwent changes which only modified it and did not alter it any major way(*Subaltern Studies V*, 2011, 29). The government after independence had no considerable intention to see adivasis as their own countrymen, and hence reforms to counteract the feudal authority weren't constituted. More so, the landlords were recruited in the government as ministers with power and portfolios behind them. Under such a scenario it became even more complicated to abolish the practices of human slavery.

Mahasweta has represented this ideology of feudal lords in the novel. She has exposed this long-standing tradition of feudalism through landlord Lala Baijinath. She has portrayed him as a paragon of feudal authority to expose the shameless fleecing of the adivasis by the landlords:

Baijnath has a creditor-debtor relationship. ..It is not the wish of either the foreign or the indigenous administration that real relationships grow up between the officers and subject groups. It is more auspicious for the administration to keep the relationship completely unreal. then in the officer's eyes, the humans can remain a mathematical calculation of supplied census statistics. And in the eyes

of the people of the administration can remain the king's elephants.
Elephants that are no use to them yet must be reared by them.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 32-35)

In the Indian context, a meticulous study was made by Ranajit Guha who highlighted this shift of power from colonial regime to the native bourgeoisie. He observes that the natives who happened to rise above their stations, instead of promoting the cause of their own people, engendered the interests of the colonial or feudal authority. Guha expostulates:

...colonial elitism, and bourgeoisie national elitism. Both originated as ideological product of British rule in India, but have been assimilated to neo-colonist and neo-nationalist form of discourse... (the subaltern comprise the) subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and intermediate strata in town and country-, that is the people. ...(subaltern means) the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we defined as elite. (The elite comprise the) dominant groups, foreign as well indigenous (where in the latter constitutes) the biggest feudal magnates...mercantile bourgeoisie and the native recruits to the uppermost levels of bureaucracy...(who) still acted in the interests of the (feudal magnates) and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own being

(*Selected Subaltern Studies*, 37-44)

In shocking revelations, Mahasweta details the intricate workings of feudalism, and how its unchecked working corrupts the landlords to dehumanize the farmers into exploitation. In the novel, there are political forces at play which deliberately subdue the farmers into a labour-force and it's not only by power of politics the system is enforced, but by the foul concoctions of divine law, distortions of religion etc. Tirathnath, who is Baijnath's successor, serves as a memento of the continuing prevalence of feudalism. It is through his new ideology Mahasweta highlights the belief system of the landlords who deem their job as sanctioned by some divine law, "I'll take bonded labour. to take bonded labour from adivasis and untouchables is my natural duty (*Chotti Munda*, 50).

In the novel it is not only feudal lord but also the elite industrial magnates who are determined to exploit the tribals. Mahasweta highlights this practice through the character of Harbans, a scion of Industrialization in the Chotti village. The industrialist Harbans is a hypocritical man, who hides behind the veneer of his modernity-the motor cars and radio etc., and so deeply he believes he is modern, that he is oblivious to the fact his acts are still medieval and uncivilized and downright exploitative just like Tirathnath's. The cover might have undergone a drastic makeover to look humanistic, yet the book is still about the gross continuation of corrupt suppression. This can be taken as a severe indictment of the notion of independence, for it might suggest India shining with escalating economy and unprecedented boom in social sector, but the agrarian foundation of the country that is the tribal masses are still exploited. Only a glimmer of modernity has hailed India after independence. Its roots are still buried in the colonizing abuses of feudalism. Reading into the hypocritical assertions of Harbans, one is provoked to see the truth.

(Harbans who is a symbol of capitalism) finds Tirathnath (a symbol of feudalism) and the matter of moneylending medieval...hey his wits are ancient... A man who doesn't buy a motor car, doesn't play the radio, doesn't run to the county seat to roam the movie houses and hotel-bars-who wears a knee-length dhoti, a coarse kurta and sturdy cobbler-shoes-whose idea of entertainment is to listen to the 'Feats of Rama' sung by the village bards-seems in Harbans's eyes a country hick, somewhat uncultivated. Only philistines gain from money lending according to Harbans. Bonded labour and making the poor work for lower wages also seem to him to be philistine behaviour. Harbans sees no fault in himself, although he doesn't not give Chotti and his people more than twelve annas, and in bad times makes famine-struck folks dig hard ground at no more than four.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,175)

Hence in the analysis aforementioned, Mahasweta Devi as an author and a historian is committed to write a subaltern historiography because she sincerely intends to question the power structure that has inhibited and silenced the subalterns. Mahasweta Devi's ethnographic activism which is premised on historical documentation is abundantly

evocative in her novels. As an author she weaves a piquant narrative about the culture of the tribals and as a historian, Mahasweta comes forth as a 'subaltern historian and 'becomes an arbiter of values' (*Reading* , 190). It's her *raison d'être* to brazen out the polemics of subaltern historiography by the 'novel use of historical sources as a prelude to establishing the subaltern as the agent of historical change' (*Reading* , 220). In regard to the novel, she has diligently and quite vehemently addressed the issues of Fourth World Culture which in India has faced oppression of the colonials and the post-colonial India.

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