
MAHASWETA DEVI'S WOMEN AND THEIR PORTRAYAL AS EMPOWERED ENTITIES

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi (January 14, 1926 - July 28, 2016). She has been one of those writers who wrote about the beleaguered and harassed women in the feudal as well as in the capitalistic system which still preserves the essence of feudal abusive and manipulative modes. She has not merely written about them but also worked for them.

As ardent readers, when we evaluate the stories of Mahasweta Devi, we get a feeling that the circumstances of the oppressed (particularly women) in the whole of India and the violence meted out to them remains identical. Pecuniary manipulation, sexual subjugation and state violence – all put together make the lives of women wretched and torturous.

Through this paper I intend to establish the power of Mahasweta Devi's written words in bringing across the struggles and sufferings of women in Indian society before a wider audience. In her narratives (*Draupadi, Hajar Churasir Maa and Rudali*), Mahasweta Devi's women may face subjugation and struggles but each woman emerges empowered. The paper studies the circumstances under which each woman character sketched out by Mahasweta Devi, have emerged more powerful, with command over the situation they are forced into. Further this paper aims to pay tribute to the genius of Mahasweta Devi the activist and the writer.

Introduction: Over the centuries, the worst among all tortures was the establishment of man's control over woman's body that would guarantee her subservience for as long as he wanted. Sexual violence must have thus originated in the sadistic minds of cruel men who at the same time created myths and legends about chastity and how chaste women were empowered with a supreme power equivalent to that of Gods to control the elements of the earth and the universe.

Violence against women has become a symbolic gesture of exploitation and disempowerment.

Mahasweta Devi, the noted Bengali writer disgusted by the modes of humiliation that the lower castes, especially the womenfolk, are subjected to, is horrified by the game of politics that tries to break the life-force of women who fight for emancipation from suppression on behalf of their caste and clan. The writer has attempted at presenting the shocking realities that occur behind the socioeconomic and political iron curtains, through her most powerful work *Draupadi*.

The portrayal of Mahasweta's Women: The whole story of *Draupadi* is set in the tribal districts of Bengal, as is the case with almost all of Mahasweta Devi's stories. *Draupadi* or *Dopdi* Meihen is a wanted Santhal tribal widowed woman, a Naxalite in the records of the State and the police with a price on her head. There are commonalities and differences between her and her mythological namesake *Draupadi* of Mahabharata. Mahasweta Devi weaves into the cultural history of the nation, with a counter dialogue against the oppressively hegemonic history of India and to demonstrate that centuries have passed but little has changed as far as the treatment meted out to women is concerned. Yet she adapts the

epic character to the present times using new interpretations.

The writer vernacularizes *Draupadi* into *Dopdi*, displaces her from the royal palace of Indraprastha and makes her an inhabitant of the forests. Instead of the Kauravas, her "making" happens at the instructions of Senanayak. *Dopdi*'s abuse does not stop at the dignified, refined limits of an attempted 'Vastraharan' (disrobing). *Draupadi* had her Sakha Sri Krishna who draped her with endless rolls of fabric to protect her honour but the contemporary *Dopdi* cannot seek any divine intervention. Krishna does not appear on the scene to save her and she is ravaged through the night and subjected to multiple brutal rape.

Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* emerges stronger the morning after. When the so-called custodians of law offer her clothes to cover herself, she tears the cloth to shreds and declines to cover herself with the male-defined notions of 'shame' and 'female modesty'. Had *Dopdi* covered herself, she would have reiterated the patriarchal ideologies and paradigms of 'breach of female honour and modesty'. *Dopdi* refuses to cringe or be servile and refuses to act predictably. Contrasting the mythological *Draupadi*, *Dopdi* resists guilt, shame or mortification when she steps out unclothed in the open, dares Senanayak and other rapists to "kounter" her.

The free spirit in her defies the rapists with, "you can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front to spit a bloody gab at and says, there isn't a man that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, Kounter me, Come on counter me -?"

She seems to have emerged like a sphinx over the ashes of her previous night's trauma.

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid”.

In a powerful masterstroke, Mahasweta Devi transforms the powerless tribal woman the raped victim into a challenger, who wields her mangled, wounded body as a weapon to terrify the perpetrators of violence. And she speaks out. “Her voice is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation.” Mahasweta Devi thus gives her Woman a voice and power from within.

Mothering can be a challenging journey to traverse and this process of navigation often has devastating consequences on women’s psychological and physical health. While discussing motherhood and mothering, Mahasweta Devi’s *Hajaar Churasir Maa* (Mother of 1084) and *Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver) gather most responses. The former is set in the backdrop of Calcutta, in the 1970s when the city reverberated with the Naxal movement which shook the world of an “apolitical mother” Sujata Chatterjee.

This was the time when the Naxal movement reached the urban Calcutta and engulfed within its fold young students like Brati (Sujata’s son) who wanted to join hands with the oppressed labourers and in the process got eliminated from the face of the earth. His cruel murder leaves Sujata at the crossroads of life. Sujata introspects and learns – from other women in the periphery of her life and from society. This as her son vanishes - not only from mention in the newspaper headlines but also from the collective thoughts of the Chatterjee family. Sujata remains an ‘Outsider’. Nandini, Brati’s girlfriend, too, compels Sujata to re-think the restrictions and limitations of the mother-child bond, by inquiring into the very foundation of her relationship with Brati:

Everyone remains a stranger these days to everyone...it is an obligation these days to know one’s own son.

Rudaali remains a feminist version in more ways than one – It is a tale of endurance, a saga of the survival of the fittest. The character of Shanichari is a microcosm for the suffering of the marginalised in society. It is larger discourse of struggle and exploitation that members of the marginalized sections of society go through in their daily grind. Her inability to weep is symbolic of these larger concerns, their struggle for their very existence, that make them unable to externalize their innermost emotions. Ironically, Shanichari finds her financial sustenance in life as a Rudaali (professional mourner), paid to grieve and shed tears at the death of the upper classes. Her tears become her source of livelihood. Mahasweta Devi clearly implies that even their tears do not belong to them – the flow of tears like the rest of their bodies are commodified, made hostage to the wishes of men who employ them.

Yet Shanichari, becomes smart enough to contemplate the establishment of a union of Rudaalis and prostitutes – to make their unplanned occupations into structured professions – more organized. In the process her thoughts make these marginalized women more empowered and systematized.

This Shanicharisaga depicts her makeover from a feeble, helpless, repressed woman to one who is resilient empowered, manipulative and insightful. Her success and awakening is the success of the community she lives in. Her community helps her to find her strength.

If we compare Shanichari with Sujata Chatterjee, we find a dichotomy. Though Sujata Chatterjee has her immediate family, she is utterly alone, lonely. Her situation is far more pathetic because her sense of loneliness stems despite the fact that she is surrounded by her immediate family, which is aloof, unsupportive and does not care to understand her needs and desires. Her experiences, which she suffers on her own, make her a courageous and empowered woman, ready to take on the world, at her own pace and terms.

As she relives the dastardly killing of her son, Sujata searches for an explanation, but fails to find any legitimacy for his death. At the same time, she gains an insight into society and realises that the cancer of illegitimacy has spread throughout society - in the "administration, in the cultural-intellectual establishment, in politics, in the existence of a whole anti-social fringe of killers prepared to serve the interests of any organised police force anywhere." Sujata also becomes aware of the sharp dichotomies that exist in society between the various classes.

Sujata’s cry at the end can be construed as a ‘second birth’, an outcome of the pain she had experienced at the time of Brati’s birth and then death. She acquires a dominant voice of her own, drowning out all other voices; a time when she has gained clarity about the true meaning of motherhood’. The society, which earlier was her identity, now becomes truly unfamiliar for her. They are dead, while the dead is truly alive.

Somehow, Sujata’s cry, Shanichari’s tears and Dopdi’s ululation seem connected: *Hajaar Churasir Maa* highlights the pleasures and pains associated with motherhood. In *Rudaali*, while Dulan’s wife takes over the caring of Shanichari’s infant (after her husband’s death) by giving him the milk from her daughter-in-law, who was also nursing, Dulan offers her a job as part of a group of labourers who have to repair the rail line. Thus, Dulan and his wife literally become Sanichari’s saviours:

The breastfeeding by Dhatua’s wife kept Haroa alive. While Sanichari worked on the job, she didn’t need to

cook. *Dulan's wife would send her meal of roti and achar along with Dulan's.*

Shanichari continues to fight the twists and turns of her life and continues to live and work for her child and herself. She herself has a community to which she belongs and that in return mothers her and supports her. Shanichari's tears flow when she learns of Bhikni's death and also the truth that Bhikni in reality was her mother.

Dopdi's cry of ululation is a sign of challenge and final victory over self and the antagonists.

Conclusion: *"Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" and that "violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men."*

Unfortunately, it is the target that withers under blame and shame. Mahasweta Devi makes it very

explicit through Draupadi's response that the physical body that experiences agony and mortification is in fact the woman's sarmament to be handled boldly against all forces of oppression that seek to subdue her character and her status within the family or society.

The irony lies in the fact that male-controlled societies, which weave myths around the protection of women's honour and rights at all costs, make all efforts to violate it underlying the hypocrisy behind all ideals.

Mahasweta Devi's women protagonists, who go through all forms of physical, mental and emotional violence, emerge stronger at the end of the stories. They emerge empowered, tougher with deeper understanding of life and also learn to deal with life's situations.

References:

1. Presented a paper 'Exploring Marginalized Men and Women in Hindi Cinema' at the International Conference on Literature and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives in African American Australian and Indian Dalit Literature at IGNOU, New Delhi.
2. Presented a paper titled 'Mahabharata in Kalyug: A Bakhtinian Perspective' at the International Conference on Bakhtin in India: Exploring the Dialogic Potential in Self, Culture and History. This Conference was organized by the Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, 19-21 August 2013
3. Presented a paper titled PAVING A DIFFERENT PATH IN PEACE EDUCATION: the contribution of Indian Music.' at the International Conference on Peace Education in Shridhar University, Pilani, India, 6 & 7th Dec, 2014
4. Presented a paper titled THE LORD OF DANCE – A VISUAL TREAT at the International Media Summit on Visual Media Culture held on 20th & 21st February 2015 at K. C College Mumbai
5. Performed a musical presentation of some of Gandhiji's favourite songs and Bhajans to bring out his philosophy of life, living peace and nonviolence at the Gandhian Studies Centre, BNM College, Mumbai on 28th February 2015.
6. Presented a Paper at the National Seminar on Social Change and Development in India held on 27th May at IGNOU, New Delhi
7. Some of the notable Publications are:
8. Co-authored and researched a book 'Mountains' published by IL&FS in association with the NGO Pratham for underprivileged children.
9. Her research paper entitled 'Exploring Marginalised Men and Women in Hindi Cinema' has been published in the book 'Literature and Social Change', Kalpaz Publication, New Delhi. The same paper was also published in the online magazine Sangharsh. (www.academia.edu/5585478/Jan._to_March_2013_Vol_02_Issue_2)
10. The paper 'Mass Media and Social Change' was published in The Leadership Review. (theleadershipreview.org/authors/shamali-gupta-bose/)
11. The paper 'Anandadhara bohiche bhuvane...Tagore songs for Peace and Happiness' was published in the book Indian Perspective of Peace & Development leading to Global Harmony and Unity, edited by Dr. Ravidra Kumar published by the Indian Institute of Indology and Oriental Studies, Shridhar University, Pilani.
12. The paper 'The Lord of Dance – A Visual Treat' was published in the K C College Media Research and Communication Journal (MRCSJ) ISSN 2394-7494
13. She has been free-lance journalist with over 200 feature articles (on the Music and dance) to her credit for national newspapers and magazines. An amateur archer, she has won the overall gold medals at the Mumbai Mayor Cup Indoor Archery Competition 2015 & 2016.
14. A free spirit, she needs to constantly escape and explore the exotic locales in India. Reading is her life and music her heartbeat.

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