

Cultural Inheritance and Subjugation in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the cultural inheritance and the Subjugation of the oppressed in Mahasweta Devi's play, *Water (Jal)*, which was translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer, was a committed social activist, dramatist, novelist, short story writer and winner of many prestigious awards for her contribution to the field of literature and cultural studies. She has written several novels and short stories in her native language, almost half of which were later translated. Her works are based on the marginalised and the oppressed, projecting her concern for the downtrodden. In the play, the basic consent was denied for a particular group of people which in turn exploded into a rebellion. The use of characters, plot construction and structure paves way for the exploration of the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed. This paper also focuses on the myth and the agrarian society of the post-colonial India in regard to the play.

Keywords: Exploitation, Oppression, Poverty, Inhumanity, Bonded labour.

India, a sub-continent, larger than Europe is the birthplace of many religions with its varied culture. Though India is known for “Unity in Diversity”, there exist social injustices such as untouchability, feudalism and bonded labour. These social evils were practiced mostly in the northern part of the country. Besides the effort of many social reformers notably B.R. Ambedkar and even after passing of the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955 (later renamed as Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976), it still prevails in some parts of India.

As a monumental writer, Mahasweta Devi depicts such social injustices that happened in post-colonial India in her play, *Water*. Her concern for the marginalised has been propagated through all her works. In the book, *Five Plays*, she asserts,

After so many years of independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, direct against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing (Introductionix).

The play, *Water* delineates the life of Maghai, traditional water diviner, “the knowledge he has inherited from his ancestors” (155), belongs to a particular community of people called Doms. She has also used characters belonging to different communities. Doms are larger in number in the state of West Bengal. Traditionally, they were basket weavers, agriculturalist, bonded labourers and drummers. This can be evident from the description of Scene 4 in the play, “On a dazzling bright stage, Maghai, Phulmani and Dhura are seen weaving baskets from bamboo stalks” (*Water* 143).

Maghai, an untouchable and other untouchables of the village are not allowed to access water from the public well, when the feudal lords bath their cattle in the well. Santosh Pujari who is defined as the “government’s son-in-law”, has “five big wells and three small ones” (159) of his own for his exclusive use and relishes on relief materials for drought sent

to the people. The portrayal of the denial of basic rights of the people by those who hold higher power in the caste system is represented through the character, Santosh Pujari. This social injustice has also been dealt by Mulk Raj Anand in his novel, *Untouchable*, where the lower caste people are not allowed to stand on the platform of the well. Anand writes:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because ... the upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed to access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream... they had to depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitcher. (26)

As water is the major source of all life, the river Charsa, “the Preserver of Life” (154) is the only source of water for the villagers. The river will dry during the summer and it is flooded during rainy season. As untouchables are not allowed to draw water from the public well, they dug the sandbars of the river Charsa “for a cup of water” (138). The height of injustice is the denial of water for the people to drink. Every year, Maghai helps Santosh Pujari to locate the water source underneath to dig a new well, yet he is denied water, from the well. This can be seen in the conversation between Dhura and One of the Naxalites in Scene 1 of the play.

DHURA. ... My father (*raises his hands to his head*), Maghai Dom knows all about water. Every year he spots the place, Santosh digs, and there is a new well.

ONE. Then what’s the problem?

DHURA. They won’t allow us to touch it. Even at the government wells, we aren’t allowed to draw water. That’s why we have to go and dig at the sand of Charsa. (126)

According to the Article 17 of Indian constitution, untouchability is a punishable offence and its practice in any form is forbidden. There is a constant negation of human rights

and untouchability is practised in varied forms in many places, in the play. When the lower caste people distribute the prasada in the village, they are not allowed to stand under the roof of the huts of upper caste people. Even though the story is set in post-colonial India, after passing of the Untouchability Offence Act, the upper caste people who hold administrative power wanted to be a conservationist, following caste discrimination. This is exhibited through the assertion of Dhura:

DHURA. ... When we go to distribute the Prasad from the Dharma Puja in the village, they won't let us stand under the ledges of their huts--- we're the untouchables.

ONE. We've gone all over that, Dhura. The castes, upper and lower, don't mean a thing. They are labels designed by men. The Constitution's clear on that. But who cares to uphold the constitution? (126)

Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act was passed in 1976. Bonded labour or debt bondage is debt slavery where the indebted has to work under the moneylender till they repay the money. The people in the village work as bonded labourers under Santosh Pujari. It is obvious when Maghai states, "He's the landowner of landowners, the moneylender of moneylenders" (169). The untouchables are paid only a meagre amount of money for their labour. They work as hired agricultural labourers, having no land of their own, "till his[their] land as *khet mazdoors* for a pittance and some snacks"(161).

The Doms are uneducated people without employment. When they don't have enough money or proper education, the upper caste people like Santosh Pujari sent their children to a nearby town, Patul, by bullock carts for education. As a representative of upper caste and holding an administrative power, Santosh Pujari relishes on the money from relief materials which he never delivers to the villagers. He swindles their scholarship and the free books, chalks and slates allotted to them by the government. He has acres of land under false names

and earns six thousand rupees a year from his personal property. The untouchables are also denied of kerosene against their ration cards, drugs that government send them and the doctor sent to treat them visit only the houses of the upper caste. When the villagers died of starvation, the sub-divisional officer, Santosh Pujari enjoys breakfast with “thickened milk, sugar and chida” (135).

Phulmani, the wife of Maghai is valiant and plain-spoken when she confronts Santosh Pujari. She aptly comments on Santosh Pujari as, “Men trade in paddy, you trade in relief” (137). The conflict is not only between the oppressor and the oppressed but also within the family of Maghai. Phulmani and Maghai seem to accept their way of life. This acceptance of dominance can also be seen in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie*, where Munoo has “a deep-rooted feeling of inferiority to the superior people who lived in the bungalows and wore Angrezi clothes” (267). In contrast with the character of his parents, Dhura is rebellious and violently protests against the subjugation. The contradictory speech between Phulmani and Dhura as follows:

PHULMANI. ... Being brahmans and eating with the doms, those are city ways, not for the like of us.

DHURA. City ways maybe, but isn’t the city real? It’s only the village Charsa and its dom ghetto and Santosh who are real, and the rest just fantasy? (*Water*144)

India holds people belonging to different cultural background. Each culture has their unique cultural practices. These cultural practices may vary from each other from their traditional songs and beliefs. These beliefs and practices will be performed and transformed from generation to generation. For instance, In Temsula Ao’s *Stone People from Lungterok*, the Nagas believe that their ancestors came out of earth from the stone henge. Similarly, in the play, the Doms believe that **nether** Ganga has chosen them as her priest. They believe that

it is a privilege to follow the work of their ancestors. They are bound to their duty. This can be evident from the following assertion of Maghai,

MAGHAI. ...The work we were born to may not provide us with food, but was left to us by our ancestors, my grandfather, his father, his father- for ages it has been our work. (146)

MAGHAI. ... How can I refuse to come for a job that's been handed down to me by my ancestors, a job that I owe to my caste? ... (153)

Culture includes ideas, customs and social behaviour of a community of people. In the play, Maghai believes that it is his duty to pay obeisance to his work by performing water divining, "a job that I [he] owe to my [his] caste" (153), free of charge, even when he starves. In such a way they inherit their culture from their ancestors and pass it on to generations. The people not only inherit their culture, but also inherit the dominance and the acceptance of dominance from their ancestors. As U. R. Ananthamurthy states in his author's note, "a slave can fight back- but Untouchability gets internalized. The victim gradually begins to feel he is untouchable" (*Bharathipura* x). They follow it as age old custom. This can be evident from the following:

MAGHAI. His father did the same thing

DHURA (*rises to his feet in anger*). Why should he be doing what his father did?

MAGHAI. It's always the same, Dhura. (*Water* 149)

Corruption, a form of criminal activity is prevalent in India. Among all the hurdles faced by the lower caste people, corruption (bribery) acts as a medium for progressing caste discrimination. There are different scales of corruption and it can be in any sector, either private or the government. According to a survey conducted in 2017, the foremost reason for corruption is greed for money, power, luxury and materialistic desires. In the play, the village school teacher, Jiten, who stands for the untouchables, is persuaded virtually by the SDO to

commit corruption in a forbidden form by sharing the relief grants. They find trading in relief grants as ancestral business. They build palaces and houses “rising from height to height”(125) out of relief funds. They quench their materialistic thirst.

In the end of the play, the Doms construct dams with the boulders. For influencing the lower caste people in constructing a dam, Jiten was branded as a Naxalite and a violent attack was imposed upon the untouchables. However the play ends tragic, as to the words of Bhagat Singh, “A rebellion is not a revolution. It may ultimately lead to that end”, the Doms had built a dam with the boulders, representing a form of rebellion. By sketching the lives of the oppressed, Mahasweta Devi affirms that they should not be unassertive and submissive. Even though laws were made to benefit the untouchables, the afflictions inflicted on them still exist. As Mahasweta Devi stated in the foreword of *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi*, “When they rise, get organised and fight back, only then history can be changed” (qtd. E. Satyanarayana 127). Thus the play brings to light, the struggles of downtrodden and indicate a solution to end their suffering.

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