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‘Ulgulan’ of the Underdogs for freedom in Mahasweta Devi’s works- *The Hunt, Douloti the Bountiful and Aranyer Adhikar*

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi was a prolific writer who dedicated her life to unmask the plight of the downtrodden. She was a passionate activist and a journalist. Thus, her characters rise above the mere fabric or fiction but is imbued with humane feelings. She worked amidst the tribals and was aware of the deprivation and social injustice that they face on a regular basis. *The Hunt, Douloti the Bountiful and Aranyer Adhikar* are stories of such tribal people who rise against this oppression and voice their struggle for social justice.

Key Words: Social justice, rebellion, right of forest, tribals, ulgulan.

Introduction

The famous French philosopher, Rousseau, was indeed wiser than he knew when he speaking about the sad situation of human beings said that “man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains”. (Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*,1) Placed as he is in the peculiar condition of his precarious existence, he always pines for a state of freedom in which

he may enjoy the right of his free thought, free action and free realization of his ideal. But most unfortunately, cabined, confined and constricted as he is, by social, political and economic fetters, he is severely and rigorously restricted by obstructions and impediments of various nature so that his natural talents and qualities do not find full and free expression and fulfillment. Freedom has various levels and stages beginning from physical and material to intellectual, moral and spiritual states. However, unless the basic state is ensured and guaranteed to the common man, he has hardly any chance of attaining true and perfect freedom which is blessed with the bliss and joy of existence. So, all the writers and thinkers of the world have not only sung the glory and power of freedom, but also have fought for its attainment and realization, particularly in the lives of men who have been regularly and ruthlessly robbed of this basic right to freedom of existence.

Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Bengali novelist and social activist, a human being of sensitive nature and having comprehensive consciousness and critical conscience, could deeply realize the intensity and pervasiveness of human suffering inflicted by the high and mighty of the urban society who systematically subjected the underdogs, the unprivileged and in particular the ignorant rural folks and the tribals to political, social, physical and sexual exploitation in all possible ways. So, profoundly shocked and wounded at the colossal scale of torture and suffering of the underdogs, Mahasweta felt it a bounden duty to bring them to the knowledge of the common people who remained so long ignorant of such horrible human tragedy which was being enacted in a large part of the Indian sub-continent on the pretext of progress and development. So Mahasweta in her human urge to measure the depth, intensity and extent of their misery made several visits to these tribal areas of India and gathered gruesome personal experiences of their wholesale exploitations which actually prompted her as a sensitive human being and committed writer to assert her intention to reveal to the world the stark truth of their tragic situation. No wonder she candidly confessed: "I think creative

writer should have some social conscience. I have a duty towards society” (*Imaginary Maps*, xii). This is what she says in one of her conversations with Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak. She was, according to Spivak instrumental in wiping out the lines of divisions among the tribes, as she wants to see them as ‘a united community in India’. She formed the Adim Jati Aikya Parishad (Tribal Unity Forum) in order to achieve her mission. Indeed, Mahasweta was possessed with an extremely sensitive ‘social conscience’ which urged and inspired her to probe deep into the malady of the tribals in many parts of the country, though her role as an activist was largely restricted to West Bengal. Mahasweta saw for herself the abysmal poverty and pain, torture and persecution of the tribal men and women. So, the artist in her not only felt and realized their gravity and intensity but also effectively expressed the extent of their inconsolable agony and anguish in the forms of excruciating artistic etchings. It is indeed difficult, almost impossible, to plumb the depth of their almost perennial pain by an outsider, even if he/ she has the feelings to realize such rude reality of the savagery of so called civilized beings who stooped to utter animality to satiate their greed for money or lust for sex which is actually almost unquenchable. No wonder all her stories and novels are realistic reflections of the unrelieved and total tragedy to which these unfortunate men and women of the so-called low class were victims.

Mahasweta began writing stories and novels from very early stage of her life. Initially she adopted the conventional mode of writing her fictional work following the tradition set by her predecessors, both male and female. But even in her creations of younger years one can easily discover the promise of her future achievement which carved out for her a permanent place in the history of Bengali fiction. Before being prompted by an inner urge to become a chronicler of the stark tragedy of the tribal people, she expressed her creative faculty as a writer in the forms of novels which dealt with some aspects of social and historical context with remarkable dexterity and impressive originality. It is in these works

that she gave ample evidence of her ability to tell stories that could hold one's interest to a remarkable extent. Her creative powers found innovative expressions in such works of varied subject matter as *Nati or The Dancer*, *Modhure Modhur or The Sweetest of the Sweet*, *Premtara or The Love Star*, *Atotuku Asha or Just a little Hope*, *Timir Lagan or The Hour of the Night*, *Tarar Andhakaar or the Darkness in a Star* and a few others unfold some of the aspects of the contemporary society. But she gradually matured into a master craftsman who could delve deep into human situation and psychology and powerfully portray the most painful condition of a section of society which suffered in silence as it did not have the power to vent its feelings to the rest of the world. But fortunately for them, and for the Indian society that Mahasweta not only stood by them but brought out the enormity of their tragedy through her writings which actually acted as an eye opener to most people of India who were either unaware of this crime against humanity or simple indifferent to their sad situation, ensconced as they were in the privilege of social security and economic stability.

Examples of such excruciating experience of those underdogs of the society expose, on the one hand, the callousness and indifference of the Government and, on the other hand, the abysmal ignorance of the so-called enlightened people and social reformers who hardly spared a thought for them. This fact is not only evident from the written and unwritten pages of history, but from the untiring and life-long dedication of a writer like Mahasweta Devi and some of her ilk who braved danger and death for exposing truth. The consequences of her adventurous quest and exploration have found interesting and illuminating expression in her many fact based fictional works which are replete with the unending persecution and pains of these underdogs. We will touch upon a few of them which are enough to provide us a penetrating picture of the heart rending inhumanity of those beings who can be called nothing more than what Dryden describes as 'that two-legged thing' (*Absalom and Achitophel*, 21), the bipeds.

The lone rebellion of Mary and the pathetic submission of Douloti:

Mahasweta Devi's work *Imaginary Maps* consists of three short stories and all of them portray the horrors of exploitation from different perspective. It is the common theme which binds the three stories together under a single title. *Shikar* or *The Hunt* provides for an interesting reading. It is the tale of Mary Oraon who is a tribal girl and her struggle and ultimate victory in the face of extreme adversity. The story is set against the backdrop of *jani parab*, a women's hunting festival carried out in tribal parts of Jharkhand and Bihar. 'She resurrected the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice to a crime committed against the entire tribal society' (*Imaginary Maps*, xiii). Mary is a tribal of mixed blood being born of a tribal mother and a white father. This gives her slightly different looks— 'tall, flat featured, light copper skinned' (*Imaginary Maps*,1), which makes it difficult for her to find a mate among her community. Though she commands a certain respect and reverence, however, the tribals keep a distance from her and she knows and no Oran boy will ever ask for her hand in marriage. Still her uncommon looks and brilliance of character has earned for Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. "She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her rightful place at the market" (*Imaginary Maps*,2). Faced with the choice of giving into the Tehsildar's amorous advances or remaining resolute to her dream of marrying Jalim, the choice before Mary is clear. She is a woman of the world, she is aware of the mal intentions of the Tehsildar thus Mary has no qualms in resorting to violence in order to protect her dignity. The Tehsildar naturally is representative of the powerful mainstream— the corrupt contractor indulging in acts of illegal deforestation for profit. In fact, he is a part of the entire corrupt system, symbolic not just of this state, but the length and breadth of the country. "Mary's killing of the Tehsildar therefore takes on larger repercussions as the subaltern's challenge to and ultimate victory over the so-called mainstream; an assertion of their very existence and independence" (Sen,17). Mahasweta

describes the traditional Festival of Justice as an annual hunt, after which ‘the elders would bring offenders to justice’. Every twelfth-year women take their turn at the hunt. Mary revitalizes both the hunt and its judiciary function when she arranges to meet the contractor Tehsildar Singh in the forest on the day of the hunt and subsequently ‘kill the beast’ (*Imaginary Maps*,17). At the beginning of the story, the narrator traces the railway line near Kuruda and describes a billboard that reads “Kuruda, Outstation, Abandoned” (*Imaginary Maps*,1). The village was probably cut off from rail services because it was not profitable. *The Hunt* suggests that Tehsildar Singh is only the first of many contractors interested not only in obtaining Kuruda’s forest resources, but also in having the transportation infrastructure ‘developed’ in order to make the extraction of lumber more cost-effective. When Mary is unable to persuade anyone in Kuruda (from the estate owner to the Oraons who will provide cheap labour for the felling) to resist Tehsildar’s plan to take their trees, she takes action against him.

The hopeless submission of Douloti:

Devi’s short story *Douloti, the bountiful* is the representation of the ignored female tribal history. Douloti who is from the village of Palamau, is sold into bonded prostitution. She contracts a venereal disease and dies on her way from hospital to her village in Seora. Her death significantly takes place on the map of India, which is drawn, in the clay on the ground by a local village schoolmaster the previous night on the occasion of celebrating the Independence Day. But in the morning when he arrives in the school the school-master, Mohan is confronted with Douloti’s violent death which is described thus: ‘Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting standard of the Independence flag.' (*Imaginary Maps*, 27)

The woman's body becomes the means to pay the loan in the kamiya system of bonded labour. Not only are they deceived and brought in the city to live the rest of their lives as whores but just like their forefathers, who are bonded labours they are bonded whores. They are cheated and lied every day, their debt never ends only their life ends in a bid to repay the loan to the moneylender.

In a sense therefore Mahasweta could be regarded as a valiant rebel who has fearlessly exposed the immensity of hate and inhumanity of one section of men against the helpless suffering of another section of men and women who were made to undergo unrelieved misery and suffering inflicted by a richer and more socially and politically powerful class of people.

Birsa Munda's 'ulgulan':

The tale of the sufferings of the underdogs is long and Devi's novella *Aranyer Adhikar* brings out the poignant state of the tribals in an endearing way which would be enough to give us a view of the enormity of the abysmal tragedy of the indigenous and tribal people, the hated and the hunted underdogs of the civilized society.

Her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* which is based on a colonial peasant uprising in which the tribals, under the dedicated leadership of Birsa Munda and his friends and followers participated, brings out the accumulated and suppressed sufferings, and ruthless repression that has been perpetrated through the ages. These repressed tribals were systematically and forcibly robbed of their land and the rich forest products which were their only means of sustenance. Birsa Munda having some education and sensitive conscience and being conscious of the depredation and plunder of their bare means of living dedicated his life for

organizing a sort of rebellion against the powerful onslaught of native and foreign exploiters of their food and freedom which ultimately led to a real revolution for which he had to pay the price with his life as he was tortured to death inside the prison, but he died perhaps nurturing the hope that the fire of “ulgulan” of revolution which was lit through his martyrdom would not be extinguished before they regain their primitive right to the forest and the dignity of a human being. However, as Mahasweta lamented, even today after 70 years of independence, water body, forest, agricultural land and other natural possessions of the native people are being plundered and looted by the people in power.

She feels the tragedy of these men with the sense and sensibility of both an artist and an activist. And makes her readers realize the utter barbarity of the oppressor’s behavior towards their fellow beings. It is because of this wholesale humiliation and deprivation of a weaker section of the society, Mahasweta felt, that the country’s progress as a civilized society has been retarded beyond measure. No wonder Mahasweta has been astounded by the appalling apathy of the successive governments in the State and at the Centre who have callously allowed a system of social and economic injustice to be perpetrated by some perverted people who are fiscally and politically powerful to practice the principle that might, physical or political or financial, is the only right which they are pleased to exercise on the underdogs of society at their sweet will. Mahasweta is rightly outraged at the utter anarchy of this attitude of the affluent who have the audacity to take the governmental authority for a ride in order to indulge in acts of anarchy at their pleasure.

Mahasweta, therefore felt obliged to adopt two roles to combat these long-standing curse of the society, that too in a country which boasts of a human heritage which has always upheld the dignity of men for the real uplift of the nation. In such a situation she thinks that she should and could do something substantial for the society if only she was able to play the roles of both an artist and a social activist. She is confident that both the roles are necessary

in order to bring out some measure of fundamental reform in the existing order of the society which is steeped in a malady that needs serious care and concern from both the socially active and the artists and other intellectual and enlightened people of the country. Being herself a very conscientious and conscious artist, she has fully fathomed the power to portray and expose these deep-seated malaises of the modern society which, in some form or other, may be found in various parts of the country. She has the conviction that with her capacity as a creative artist, she would be able to awaken the minds of men not only in this country but throughout the world to the stark reality of the utter exploitation, persecution and humiliation of the weaker sections of men so that people throughout the globe are not only made aware of this malignant malady but are encouraged to launch a mighty movement against this menace to the society.

Thus it is evident Mahasweta Devi pioneered a new path for herself by her acute observation of, and penetrating insight into, the exploitation of the primitive people in general and in particular of the women, especially of the neglected and distressed class of the tribal society. She has actually enlarged the theme and thought and the scene and setting of her novels dealing with the pestering problems of the weaker section of the society. So her novels are specifically meant to portray the manifold facets of the face of the contemporary society, and in particular of the tribals who are plagued by various problems to which these poverty stricken and oppressed people have become virtual victims. Backed by the vast and varied experiences of her long and eventful career as a creative writer and critique of the injustice inflicted on these hapless people by the higher sections of the society, she has powerfully depicted the deprivation and distress of those in the society who are not only muted but also murdered by the high and mighty who have been constantly reaping the benefits of the ceaseless labour of these lowly exploited people who can hardly give voice to their tales of tragedy. It is for this reason that Mahasweta has deliberately deviated from the beaten track

of Bengali novel in her bid to tread new grounds which urgently needed the sympathetic attention of a sensitive creative artist. Fortunately, she has succeeded in getting free from the trammels of the prevalent tradition and innovated a new path to depict a large domain of the Indian society and their ways of life to which most readers were so long totally indifferent. Consequently, in the choice of subject matter and creation of unusual characters and unfolding of startling often painful situations, she gave convincing and powerful proof of her artistic ability to realize her intended purpose as a novelist which was primarily the exposure of the abysmal poverty, agonizing persecution and exploitation of the dispossessed and the deprived of the Indian society.

The creative springs of Mahasweta Devi have found plentiful expression in a copious corpus of literature which deals with the diverse aspect of life and the varied sections of the society, though his predominant passion as a creative artist was reflected in the portrayal of the tribal society and their peculiar predicament. The insurmountable problems of their lives stemmed not only from their extreme poverty but also from the unabashed exploitation unleashed by some inhuman members of the affluent society. Needless to mention their exploitation was not restricted to mere physical and financial spheres but it inflicted a mortal blow on their mental and moral condition but Mahasweta from her very personal experience was extremely conscious of, and concerned with these problems and predicaments to which they were perpetually subjected. Needless to emphasize that the exploitation and persecution of these people was perpetrated almost from times immemorial. So it urgently needed, Mahasweta felt, an organized movement to make them aware of their untold sufferings which could lead them to think of a state of freedom or emancipation in which they could meaningfully manifest their potentiality and power to achieve their objective of all round emancipation which Mahasweta believed could alone ensure their right to self-determination. As a consequence of this movement, however feeble, the tribals have become gradually

aware of their potentialities and possibilities and a state has reached when they are prepared to raise their voice against the perpetrators. It is these tales of suffering and the muted protest of the oppressed which have been dealt by Mahasweta Devi for she strongly feels, again from her first-hand experience, that these exploited members of the society were actually bursting with the desire for the expression of their self-identity.

Conclusion

Indeed, the story of the oppression and exploitation of the underdogs of the political, economic and social systems perpetrated by the powerful and the privileged of the traditional and existing society, to say the least, simply beggars description. The real sons of the soil, the indigenous people, the tribals of a vast geographical area of India, have not only been ruthlessly and systematically dispossessed, disinherited and uprooted from the possessions of their own land and culture, but in the process of plunder and loot, these unfortunate underdogs of the society have been subjected to suppression, repression and torture of various kinds which provide a perfect picture of what the English poet, Wilfred Owen calls “superhuman inhumanity”(Owen, *Spring Offensive*) for that is the only phrase which is effectively expressive of their horrible and agonizing experiences of life which is actually a history of hatred and humiliation.

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