

From Silent Suffering to Militant Resistance: Evolution of Women in Mahasweta Devi's Select Stories

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Abstract

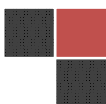
Mahasweta Devi has been a painstaking artist as well as a staunch social activist. She has taken up the cudgels to explore and exhibit the vast magnitude of suffering unleashed upon the dregs that live below the abject level of poverty in the socio-economic totem pole. Coupled with socio-political activism, Mahasweta Devi has taken her serious stance to represent the situation of women who are subordinated, merchandised and kept within the margins. As for women, her focus basically sheds upon the tribal women – the subaltern women for whom oppression is a common fate in a stratified hegemonic patriarchal frame of society. The nature and extent of suffering of a tribal woman is categorically alien to a woman in the mainstream. What is remarkable in Mahasweta Devi's representation of woman is that along with the depiction of suffering she strategically objectifies the progressive attitude in the women characters. Her women characters as individuals are not merely sufferers in the society. Gradually they grow in awareness, attitude, independence and self assertion. A tribal woman who is doubly and triply marginalized by caste, class and gender, ultimately ascends the ladder of integrity. A strategic progressive attitude to establish womanhood is evident in her writings if we carefully notice some of her characters one after another. They move on from a stagnant pallid sufferer trying to establish selfhood to a woman seeking resistance and even militant resistance against the male-oppression. So the journey of woman is one of empowerment and the writer as an activist has very deftly done her job through the power of her mighty pen.

Keywords: marginalisation, suffering, resistance, womanhood, serialised progression, militant resistance.

With the knowledge of the productivity of earth mankind came to realize the need to have control over the production and he maneuvered to exercise his authority over land, labour and women. In this way feudal structures were formed. When feudal structures gave way to the capitalistic form, the same trend of exercising authority accessed no change. As a man is the authority of land, naturally he assumed his authority over women and children. Thus the hegemony of the patriarchy took an insalubrious shape. A woman became his possession as is a piece of land. In course of time she is subjugated, reduced to virtual non-entity, polluted, made a mere object of gratification of carnal desire. So the history of women is the history of deprivation, depression, suffering and extinction. As a literary and social activist Mahasweta Devi takes pains to explore and exhibit that ugly terrain of suffering unleashed upon the dregs of the society who live below the abject level of poverty in the socio-economic totem pole. Coupled with her socio-political activism, Mahasweta Devi has taken her serious stance to represent the situation of women who are subordinated, kept within the margins. As for women, her focus basically sheds upon the tribal women or the subaltern women for whom oppression is a common fate in a stratified hegemonic patriarchal frame of society. The nature and extent of suffering of a tribal woman is categorically alien to a woman in the mainstream. What is remarkable in Mahasweta Devi's representation of a woman is that along with the depiction of suffering she strategically objectifies the progressive attitude in the women characters. Her women characters as individuals are not merely sufferers in the society. They grow in awareness, attitude, independence, self assertion. A tribal woman who is doubly and triply marginalized by caste, class and gender, ultimately grows. A strategic progressive attitude to establish womanhood is evident in her writings if we carefully examine her characters one after another. They move on from a stagnant pallid sufferer trying to establish selfhood to a protective woman seeking resistance and often militant resistance against the male-oppression. So the journey of woman is one of woman empowerment and the writer as a feminist activist has very deftly done her job through the power of her mighty pen.

Mahasweta Devi has strategically tried to reveal herself as a social activist vis-à-vis a feminist to empower women in an androcentric world. Devi has her target audience and through her writings, if seen in a chronological perspective, she conditions the audience's response strategically for the perception of the gradual evolution of women- a progression in the evolution of Mahasweta Devi's worldview. If we cast a serious look at the proliferation of Mahasweta Devi's female characters it is perceptible that these female characters form a 'composite woman'. Chronologically in a sequence they mark a journey to their womanhood. They are weak in Somri (in "The Witch"), Dhoulis (in "Dhoulis"), Douloti (in "Douloti the Bountiful"), Sanichari (in "Sanichari"), Josmina ("In Fairy Tale of Rajabasha"), vocal in Draupadi (in "Draupadi") and a militant resistant in Mary Oraon ("The Hunt"). How long can a silent sufferer like Douloti or Dhoulis or Sanicharibe desisted from holding arms? There is a voice of conscience and it manifests in various forms of dissent and protest. She turns a rebel in "Draupadi" and a militant resistant in Mary Oraon in "The Hunt." Vandana Gupta in her book *Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Reading* (2009) very minutely observes:

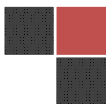
"Such an evolution of Mahasweta's narratives can be traced in a successive progression of her characters. Her characters pass through an evolutionary trajectory as they parallel the process of 'serial-ization' in her successive stories. Mahasweta's entire creative oeuvre can be read in terms of an extended story of



composite Indian womanhood and its evolution through time. Somri (“The Witch”), Douloti, Sanichari, Dopdi, Dhowli, Jashoda-these are not distinct women rather all these come together to chart out the progress of woman who is a mute witness to her exploitation (as in “Witch”), whose position of total submission transforms into a resistance acceptance of exploitative condition (as in “Douloti”), which metamorphoses into a flouting of socially-sanctioned male narrative position of a guilt-ridden, miserable sexually exploited, betrayed woman (as in “Dhouli”) that ultimately explodes into a revolting /rebellious woman who totally shatters the androcentric stereotype of a raped woman (as in “Behind the Bodice” and “Draupadi”). Her woman thus passes through the trajectory of evolution and charts a definite progression towards a composite womanhood” (150).

Douloti the Bountiful of Seora village in Palamu district is the daughter of spine-broken Crook Nagesia who is a bond slave (a kamiya) of a landed echelon Munabar Singh Chandela. He has his old scathing and tangled history of transformation into a kamiya for three hundred rupees loan from Munabar Sing. But the loan gets never repaid. After some turn of events Crook Nagesia is freed from bond slavery when a certain Brahmin god Paramananda promises to marry Douloti and pays Chandela three hundred rupees. Douloti is taken by Paramananda Mishir with the vow of marriage. But very soon the devil in the so called god dismantles the garb of a saviour. He places her in the whorehouse first to be fucked alone for a tint of three years by a lewd rich contractor named Mr Babu Latia who craves for fresh luscious first hand virgins only. For the next two years she has to endure her whoredom with Singhji. Then with the decline of tightness of her body for being unfed, undernourished, her market value plunges and she becomes no one’s particular. After that she has to entertain five to ten clients a day. Thinned and diseased for the rough use of her body, her health is quickly flagged off. The venereal diseases shelter in her body, sexually transmitted diseases befall her, and tuberculosis makes her chest hollow. She starts vomiting blood and her face swollen with patches of red blisters. When she is admitted to a local hospital, she is robbed of her small savings and she fails to go to another hospital as per the doctor’s reference. Bereft of all her wealth she now decides to go to her parents. The distance weighs upon her strength. Trudging she tries to stagger on to her destination but lies prostrate close to her house. So Douloti remained bountiful as long as she had her body tight, as long as she could gratify the animalism of inhuman ogres. The price, the value, the wealth of a girl exhausts when she physically wanes and seems detestable, stale and monotonous. So she is a silent sufferer as she says: “Therefore do Douloti, Somni, Reoti have to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise Paramananda does not get money. Why should Douloti be afraid? She has understood now that this is natural. Now she has no fear, no no sorrow, no desire” (62).

In “Dhouli” the titular protagonist is a young widow who suffers silently throughout her life. She is the daughter of a Dusad. A Brahmin youth, Misrilal being emotional and unseasoned with the intricacies of this caste-ridden structure of society, irresistibly insists on her to respond to his love in spite of her repeated rebuffs and warnings. Dhouli as a low-caste woman knows the fate of such an act of desperation- the sin or crime, whatever we may say, for going beyond the invisible but potential line drawn by the die-hard casteists. But the insisting Misrilal bursting in his youth of love makes up his mind and swears to marry her as their nuptial tie is “all right by the

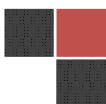


government rules.” Being young Dhoulai fails to resist his amorous advancement and it results in pregnancy. But when the news storms up to the Brahmin family, Mishrilal is sent away to be out of her sight and Dhoulai is subjected to humiliation beyond the level of tolerance. She is left unaided in the midst of an unsettling claustrophobic uneasiness and fated to endure the whim-whams of the Brahmin family. Her life is now on the mercy of the Brahmin family. The ex-gratia, if the family doles out to her, might give her a little bit of respite. Otherwise, she would be an outcast and ultimately forced to become a prostitute. Dhoulai waits for long as much as it is tolerable for her but the sheer cries of the stomach forces her to eke out a bare living with the sale of her body. This bellows on the amplified anger of the Brahmins and Dhoulai is socially boycotted from her community for bringing “dishonor” to their class, and allows her “the door through which the lion entered” to be “visited by rats and swine!”(30)

The second story of that volume *Outcast: Four Stories* (2002) by Mahasweta Devi “Sanichari” reiterates and perpetuates the theme of silent suffering, gang-rape and prostitution instituted by the mainstream. It focuses on the story of an Oraon girl, Sanichari. The circumstances thrust upon her life have been narrated against the background of dislocation of the tribes and in the context of Adijati Raksha Movement. The tribal people uprooted from their land are unavoidably led to move to the towns and cities like Kolkata for working in the brick-kilns. Sanichari is reluctant to move but at the time of violence when the BSF, BMP and CRP unleash the ambience of terror, she is subjected to the predation of gang rape along with other cronies and is deserted in the jungle naked and unfed. Trail of suffering entails. Having no means to stuff the stomach she happens to take a job in the bricklaying farm and there she is routinely raped by Rahmat who owns it. Not only the owner of the farm, but his friends, goons and even the police get the share of the taste of female flesh. However, she ultimately becomes an outcast when the brick kiln is shut off. Sanichari comes back to her place with Rahmat’s child in her womb.

The third story of *Outcast* (2002), “The Fairy Tale of Rajabasha” presents another version of exploitation of tribal women. Here the protagonist belongs to Ho tribal community. With her husband Sarjom Purti she lived a life of peace in Rajabasha. But the village money lender Nandalal Shahu lures them for higher wages and sells them off to Niranjana Singh. Niranjana rapes Josmina daily. They somehow manage to escape and seek help for shelter from Karnal Singh. But the same story of rape and oppression repeats. Escaping goes on and when again they come back to Rajabasha, Josmina has a human seed in her womb. Being reminiscent of the huge calumny, abomination and ostracisation, Josmina throws herself away into Koyena and gets drowned.

The story of “Draupadi” is set against the background of the forest Jharkhani in Southern Bengal at the time of political insurgency. Draupadi, a Naxalite Santal tribal activist, along with her husband Dulan Majhi undertakes guerilla fighting for the rights of the Santal people and leads an angry mob against the vicious oppressors who make them bonded slaves, bonded labourers and bonded workers. Draupadi’s band succeeds in killing the relentless landlord, Surya Sau who refuses to allow a drop of water at the time of drought. Dopdi in the process incurs the wrath of the state police who seek to deplete the band with fake encounters. But Dopdi Mejhena faces trouble when two Santali boys betray and spy on her. She is detected and arrested in the forest and taken to the nearby police station. There the Army Officer, the “Senanayak” orders the constables to make her up. Draupadi was made up the whole night. She does not know how many have made



her. There all the constables gang-rape her all over the night. When she is called by the Senanayak in the morning, she refuses to wear clothes and tear them to pieces. She stands before the Senanayak, totally naked, unarmed, whole body maimed and cut, her genitals matted with blood. Bruised though she is in body but the repeated rebuffs strengthen her spirit of revolt. Draupadi's belligerent and reckless reaction is evident when she is captured and serially raped. The verve and palpable narrative brilliantly brings out the resistance she puts without arms-

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth.

.....
Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind.

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Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, "The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"

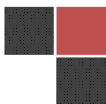
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Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?"

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at...

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid ("Draupadi"32-33).

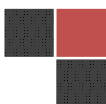
Draupadi achieves a mock victory. Though deprived but not depraved herself-she is destroyed, but not defeated. Hemingway comes at once to mind. This is the first time that a male member of mainstream society is scared, confused and finds no answer, only mumbles before naked and unarmed Dopdi.

The sequence of silent suffering to militant resistance comes to its apex with "The Hunt" that centers around the story of an Oraon girl, Mary Oraon, begotten of a white Australian father and Bhikni. Dixon's son "put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left. He went to Australia" (2). Daughter of an Oraon mother and a white father, Mary is strongly built, tall, "flat-featured, light copper skin" (2). A girl of different mettle, she earns for herself by herding the cattle, selling fruits, garden harvests and mahua fruits in the Tohri market. An independent girl, she is part of the Oraon clan and again isolated as her physical features do not match with the rest of the community. She has the guts for self assertion and the sense of individual honour. She is also seductive in appearance and resourceful in nature. In Lachman Pradas's estate she renders her strenuous service, works for them and for herself. Somehow everything goes well with her and she finds a suitor in a Muslim boy Jalim in Tohri market. She promises to marry him when he would raise one hundred rupees to his savings. Mary refuses to live a life of typical tribal woman. In the context of a marriage proposal with the son of the Prasadji's gardener she says, "-No. Living in a shack, eating mush, the man drinking, no soap or oil, no clean clothes. I don't want such life."(3) The narrative voice says, "Many men wanted to be



her lover. Mary had lifted her machete. They are outsiders. Who can tell that they wouldn't leave her, like Bhikni was left with a baby in her belly? (3). But how can a girl's life go undisturbed in a world full of male predators?

Mary's world of singularity begins to face trouble with the arrival of Tehsildar Singh, a timber merchant, in Kuruda. With a profiteering mission of buying big sal trees he lands into Prasadji's house and consequently casts his voluptuous eye on Mary. She senses the evil cast of mind in his wild looks. The libidinous desires in Tehsildar get the better of him. He dares to block her road one day with a romantic adulation and makes a flattery that she looks like Hema Maalini. Unlike a bucolic girl, she moves on and takes out a sharp machete and says in a lazy voice, "Brokers like you. With tight pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go ask if you don't believe me" (9). When complained against Mary, she again retorts – "This time I let him go with words. If he comes to fuck with me again I'll cut off his nose" (9). But the moneyed Tehsildar keeps on spying upon Mary all the while. His perverted patriarchal lavish sentiment is hurt and he cannot bear with the idea that "a Mary Oraon from a wild village like Kuruda could blow him away... That Mary wouldn't look at him and would rather marry a Muslim" (10). Another enticement is dangled to appease her. Tehsildar brings a sari from Daltonganj for Mary as a gift but she curtly throws it at him for tempting her with it. He feels affronted before a lot of people. He loses his face in everyone's eyes. The pursuit goes on. Then there comes Jani Parab, the spring festival of hunting of the tribal people. After every twelve years the turn comes for the women for hunting. Like men they too go hunting in the forest and hill. They do exactly what men usually do - they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home in the evening. But Mary becomes tired of Tehsildar's untiring lewd and single-minded advancement. Then the day comes when he catches Mary by her hand and declines to let her go. Mary is a bit scared and struggling loses her machete and somehow manages to untie his grasp. Against the background of spring the man looks like an animal. Mary should end the sport, she settles it in her mind, and otherwise it might lead her to utter ruin. She cools down, hatches a plot herself and presumes to surrender herself to that admirer on the very day of the hunting festival when others would be busy hunting and dancing in other parts of that area. It is settled. The much awaited day intervenes. When the women are all going up Kuruda Hill, and find a kill, Mary is after the big beast – "A great thirst dances in her blood. Tehsildar, Tehsildar, I'm almost there. Tehsildar wants her a lot. Now Jalim is nothing to her. With how much violence can Tehsildar want her? How many degrees Fahrenheit? Is this blood as wild as Mary's? As daring?" ... She wants to hunt the big beast! A man, Tehsildar" (15). She noticed Tehsildar wearing a red shirt, furnished with imported liquor and cigarettes. She meets him, gets drunk, smokes cigarettes and stars were strobing in her head and the intoxication of wine was putting spangles before her eyes. The bottles rolled down into the deep ravine. "Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There's fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? -Now? Yes, becomes an animal. -Now take me? Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing, Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers" (16). Blood spills out and fills her face and clothes. She takes out money from his pocket, keeps in the fold of her sari, and throws Tehsildar in the ravine, his wallet, cigarettes, and his handkerchief. She comes out and walks naked to the cut to take a bath of solid satisfaction. She has made the biggest kill. Then in darkness she walks seven miles to

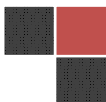


Kuruda Hills and reaches Tohri and there to awaken Jalim and go somewhere in Ranchi, Hazaribug, Gomo, Patna where destination settles. As the narrator says, “Mary is not afraid, she fears no animals as she walks, watching the railway line in the dark, by starlight. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast.”(16-17). So Mary Oraon fights back like a militant against the male oppression in her society. Ethical issues may be raised for Mary causing violence. But Mahasweta Devi justifies violence when the system fails to do justice. In an Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak she says:

When the system fails an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. The individual can not go as a suffering in silence” (Imaginary Maps xii).

While referring to different kinds of manifestations of violence in modern literature G.N.Devy points out that in the fictions of Mahasweta Devi, violence has been given a Marxist- interpretation. About Devi’s characters he says, “They face exploitation at the hands of the landlords, government officials, policemen and moneylenders. Almost invariably, her protagonists turn violent towards the end of her stories. There is a progressive kind of violence” (Devy xii, qtd in Singh 50).

The writings of Mahasweta Devi evince that she is not merely an artist for art’s sake. Her mighty pen is a means of her crusade where she shows the utmost zest for waking up the exploited to their warring errand. As a committed writer she tries to recreate the matrix of real life and transform it through her work. Literary activism is a responsible vocation for Devi. She uses it as a means to fight against socio-economic injustice done to the tribes who belong to the nether world of society being outcast, oppressed and exploited by the mainstream. As a Marxist sympathizer, she knows that human suffering is a product of class consciousness. Only protest, rebellion and revolt can empower the weaker sections in a society. Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte and Karl Marx were all rebels who carved a new course of human history. As a humanitarian thinker, Devi knew the importance of human value which finds meaning in putting up a strong resistance, rebellion and revolt against the maladjustment in the society. So her women characters undertake an odyssey from passive suffering to hard core resistance. There is a clear passage of progression – from a mute sufferer to a staunch resistant. It is in this progression that new hopes emerge – the hope for a new space, human value and self-honour. In fact, Devi aims at setting up examples of emancipated women through her writing. A die-hard social activist, acting for the cause of women empowerment, Devi succeeds in fulfilling her vision and mission through her writing and in the process her social activism finds a true meaning in literary activism. This is how she makes her pen instrumental in women empowerment, a major step in building up the image of progressive women – the women who can speak and resist and protest against various forms of oppression and exploitation. In this connection Satpal Singh’s words are worth quoting: “While scripting the fiction of exploitation and oppression that her characters suffer, she never forgets to underscore their attempts at resistance... Her works are treatise in resistance where the oppressed, in spite of severe oppression, stand with their head high. She has given a strong voice of protest to her otherwise voiceless men and women. They are deprived but they are rich in courage and fortitude. The protagonists of her stories are not docile and humble. They wage a battle even when they find themselves helpless before the formidable forces. She believes that



in order to be heard they must raise their voice; they cannot afford to remain mute.” (48-49).

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