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Brave Tribal Women: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Hunt"

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Mahasweta Devi is known for her pathbreaking and voluminous work focusing on the plight of the dispossessed tribes and landless farmers of India. She herself visited many districts of Bihar and Bengal and saw the pitiable condition of India's tribal population. These people became her primary concern. She started a journal *Bortika* for voicing the problems of these indigenous people. In this journal Mahesweta Devi publishes the unedited tales written by the tribals in their own language. She is also one of the founders of the *Denotified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group* which works for improving the condition of these people through education, legal intervention and activism. Her view is not an outsiders' view, it is an insider's view of the plight of tribal people. She knows their language, their folklore, their myth, their dreams and aspirations and, above all, their frustration with the system. She is popularly known as Didi among them. Focusing her writing on the questions of suffering of the tribal people, Mahasweta Devi writes about the uncongenial conditions where this suffering humanity is bound to lead a hellish life. Through her works, Mahesweta Devi exposes our ignorance about the rich tribal culture and tribal civilization.

Tribals are taken to be uncivilized and unsophisticated by our so called civilized world. But as we try to understand them from close quarters, we find that they are very close to nature and lead a simple and balanced life. We exploit the nature and natural resources without thinking of the consequences and feel proud of it. Denial of the subaltern rights exposes our weakness as modern civilized men. The tribal culture which, in a way, is taken to be a primitive culture, has a very rich legacy of values. *Adivasis* love to lead a life uncorrupted by the ruthlessly invasive modern civilization. They have equal love for a boy and a girl. They have extraordinary respect for their female counterparts. There is no concept of dowry system among the tribal. And, furthermore, they are very cooperative and helpful. The tribals and the tribal culture are the topics of main concern in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Her literary output is mainly centered on the plight of the subalterns

as the 'others'. As a social activist, Mahasweta Devi endeavours to change the destiny of the marginalised communities and her activism gets translated into her writings. Endorsing this view Radha Chakravarty opines her views in "Mahasweta Devi : A Luminous Anger" published in the book *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity*.

Mahesweta's current reputation as a writer rests largely on her own self projection as a champion of the tribal cause and decrier of class prejudice.(94)

Mahasweta Devi, a champion of tribal rights, has weaved her stories on the matrix of oppression where fibres of caste, class and gender intertwine. She discusses the women issues within the larger framework of class exploitation. The men and women are equally oppressed. But it doesn't mean that she underplays the issue of gender. In an interview with Gabrielle Collu, she says:

Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special problems. They add to my stories naturally, not just to uphold the woman. (224)

Devi strongly dismisses the tag of a feminist writer. But she finds "that woman suffers because of her class and she suffers because of her body" (Gabriel Collu 224). She projects women in her works as she finds them as an activist, in society. The writer's choice of not being feminist, does not underplay her concerns with downtrodden women.

Numerous women characters, in her stories come from different historical backgrounds and social milieu. The gender sensitive portrayal of women characters by Mahasweta Devi is linked to the issues of class, caste, tribe, economic condition etc. Women, in her works, come from different social backgrounds. They are dalit and upper caste, educated and uneducated, tribal and non tribal labourers and working class revolutionaries and rebels. They come from a cross section of Indian society. What binds them together to be Devi's daughters is that they all are oppressed and exploited. They are mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, bonded laboureres, witches, prostitutes, rape victims etc. but they are survivors and winners. Their resistance and refusal to be victims of oppressive system encompass the whole narrative of Mahasweta Devi. The system oppresses them at physical, sexual or psycho-emotional level, but these daughters of Devi, with their indomitable spirit, heralds a new dawn of optimism for their other sisters. The lesson drawn at the end of the day is courage. This is the courage to cry at the death of oppressors; courage to stand named in front of the oppressor; courage to shout at an insensitive husband.

Economic exploitation, sexual oppression and state violence make the lives of tribal women miserable. Mahasweta Devi brings out the pain and plight of these women in most of her major works. Devi had a long association with tribal women. She understands and comments in *Imaginary Maps* when she says:

Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed. In the nineteenth century, for example, mainstream Indian reformers had to struggle to pass a *Widow Remarriage Act* in caste-Hindu society, the society that is generally called Indian. Among the *Austrian* and *Dravidian* tribes of India, on the other hand, in the states of West Bengal and Bihar alone there are Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds, and more-widow remarriage has always been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system, only bride price. (*Imaginary Maps i*)

Mahasweta has many tribal women who are extremely courageous and independent. She places her women characters in such historical circumstances so that their socio-political positioning brings about the real causes of their oppression and marginalisation. The tribal Women's exploitation is the direct outcome of their community's exploitation as a whole. In the process of class exploitation, tribal women became an easy prey for outsiders known as *diku*. Devi's essays included in the *Dust on the Road* highlight the statistical details of the working condition of tribals, dalit women and other poor women who work as migrant and bonded labourers in the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab (*Dust on the Road* 1-24, 87-96).

Rape is the most common crime against women in India. According to *The National Crime Records Bureau 2013 Annual Report*, 24,923 rape cases were reported across India in 2012. Most rapes go unreported because the rape victims fear the humiliation. There is an increase in the number of reported cases of rape in India from 24,923 in 2012 to 33,707 in 2013. It is also revealed in the Report that Madhya Pradesh has recorded the maximum rapes in 2013 among all other states. The most horrifying fact is that majority of the offenders are known to the victims. And most of the victims are aged between 18 and 30 years. According to a *New Report* published in *The Hindu* dated Jan 22, 2016, eight tribal women from Bijapur district of south Chattisgarh have accused the security forces of "repeated gang-rape and physical torture between Jan. 11 to 14. The police didn't register their complaints. Only after four days, after tribal activist and *Aam Aadami Party* Leader, Soni Sori, addressed a press conference with the victims, the police filed the FIR. Complaints of custodial deaths, rapes and torture are frequent phenomena in the states where security forces have been deployed for security reasons.

The story "Hunt" figures in *Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi (1995). It centres around the annual hunting festival, most popular festival of the tribals of Bihar. The first part of the story shows the peaceful tribal life in the village Kuruda. Even with the decolonisation the exploitation has not come to a halt. The forests, which once belonged to tribals, are now converted into estate owned by a few rich landlords. They exploit the poor tribals as bonded labour, maids to run the homes and low wage labourers. Mary Oraon is one such victim of exploitation though she refuses to be a victim at the end of the story. Mary's mother Bikhani was employed by an Australian planter, Dixon, on his estate to look after the bungalow. The colonial masters left the area after the independence. However, in 1959 Dixon's son came to this place to sell the bungalow and he impregnates Bikhani and deserts her. That's why Bikhani's daughter, Mary Oraon, does not look like a tribal though she is

one. Prasadji is the new owner of the estate and Mary Oraon works there in place of her mother Bikhani. Mahasweta Devi captures Mary's deftness in work at Prasadji's estate.

The second part of the story marks the onset of the mainstream mechanised and industrial exploitation of tribal people. The area is planted with *Sal* trees by the Britishers. The tribals never calculated the economic value of these *Sals*. But Prasadji's son, Banwari, brought a contractor, Tehsildar Singh, to cut and ferry these precious *sals*. The poor tribals are hired by the contractor to fell 'Sal' trees. They are paid twelve *annas* daily for men. Women are paid eight *annas* for trimming the branches. Only Mary understands the tricks of the broker. She embodies the love of tribals. She tries to advise Prasadji and other village headmen, but to no avail. They were bribed by the broker. She said, "twelve annas and eight annas! No porter carried gentlemen's case for this price."⁽⁹⁾ Banwari and Tehsildar knew well that these *Sals* belong to Government, still they illegally cut the trees. Government machinery is so corrupt that the illegal action never comes to light. The virgin forests are ruined by the greed of the rich, and the poor tribals who are compelled to cut the trees out of need, are held responsible for deforestation. In "A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", Mahasweta Devi explains the great skill with which illegal deforestation continues:

Big money is involved..... The local political worthies, local police, local administrations are bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegal felled timber. Illegal saw mills come up everywhere. (*Imaginary Maps* xii)

In the story even the driver of the train is bribed who is very instrumental in carrying forward the business of taking *Sal* wood to other places.

The Contractor had a word with the driver of the train as well. The train stops at Murhai. There could be a deal so that the train will stop at Kuruda if needed. (*Imaginary Maps* 7)

The exploitation is not only economic exploitation of the *Adivasis*. It leads to sexual exploitation of *Adivasi* women. The evil hands of Tehsildar Singh touch the honour of Mary Oraon, a tribal girl. *Adivasis* value and respect the women-folk.

The story "Hunt" also focuses on violence and sexual harassment- the much used male hegemonic act to subdue and control women. The story is about the revolt of a half tribal girl, Mary Oraon, against gender oppression. She is vulnerable more because of her looks and personality but she reverses the role generally ascribed to females and counters her exploiter through her physical power. The ecological exploitation of tribals' natural resources and sexual exploitation of their women go hand in hand. But Mary preserves the both- the natural resources as well as dignity of tribal women-by killing the oppressor.

Mary Oraon is the daughter of Bikhni who looked after Dixon's bungalow and her household in Kuruda. After colonial rule, the owners gradually left Kuruda. "Dixon's son came back in 1959 and sold the house... He put Mary in Bikhni's womb before he left" (2). Mary's mother had been a subject of sexual exploitation of a colonial master. The white blood in Mary made her different from other tribal women of Kuruda. Mary now works for the estate owner, Mr. Prasad, at the Dixon bungalow. Mary's life went undisturbed till the arrival of Tehsildar Singh, a contractor invited by the son of Prasad ji, who was waiting to exploit Kuruda's forest reserve. The giant *Sal* trees and tall Mary both attract the contractor. He makes arrangements to transport felled *Sal* trees through railways. He also makes advances on Mary without much success. Mary rebuffs this 'internal coloniser' very powerfully and delivers justice by killing her potential rapist on the eve of *Janiparab*- the women's hunting festival day. Mahasweta Devi in "The Author in Conversation" in *Imaginary Maps* comments:

Among the tribals, insulting or raping a women is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society. (*Imaginary Maps xi*)

Mary refuses to be a passive victim. She, because of her colonial lineage perhaps, understands the advances of Tehsildar Singh. She plans and invites him on the Day of *Janiparab*. She hunts the prey trapped fully in her meticulously designed strategy. On *Janiparab* (a hunting festival when tribal women drink liquor, sing and hunt in the forest), the tribals give full freedom to their women to hunt like males in the jungle after every twelve years. The traditional reversal of roles is fully practised by Mary as she becomes the hunter for her aggressor.

Mary murders Tehsildar Singh. She hunts him like an animal. Tehsildar Singh, in the story, is the representative of the mainstream exploitative power that exploits the poor tribals as well as their virgin homelands. The poor *Adivasis* are forced to resort to violence for the sake of their survival. They fight to save their honour. Mary Oraon's killing of Tehsildar Singh, like an animal to protect her honour, is an act of protest against the exploitative, corrupt system which fails to deliver justice.

The tribal culture offers much liberty to women unknown to mainstream women and that way it is much superior to mainstream culture. Emphasising this point Devi comments:

The real point is, Gayatri, that it was *Janiparab*, the women's hunting festival day. She resurrected the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice to a crime committed against the entire tribal society. One of the causes of the great Santhal Revolt of 1855-56 was the raping of tribal women. (*Imaginary Maps xi*)

In her coloured *sari* and red blouse Mary looks like the 'flamboyant tree in motion'. She baits the big beast as "Like other games the hunt game has its rule" (15). Mary sees that his prey Tehsildar Singh looks like an animal. She drinks and offers it to him also. She kills him with a machete, takes out money from his pocket,

takes a bath and joins the women's gathering. She eats, drinks, sings and dances there in the company of other women. She runs to lead a comfortable life with Jalim, her dream boy.

Gender is a social construct. It refers to a set of qualities and behavioural roles ascribed to male and female in a social set up. In "The Hunt", linking the traits to particular gender is not possible. Mary's physical appearance as well as temperament deny any hereditary or behavioural factors attached with gender or biological sex. The *Janiparab*, the traditional hunting festival, allows reversal of social roles. The aggressiveness, strength, courage and bravery can be learnt from social set up. They are not necessarily gender specific traits. Mary's resistance is exemplary in the sense that it shows other women a way out to say 'No' to every oppression. She is different, singular, because of her special lineage but strategy or *modus operandi* is learnt by her in the society itself. Other women can also trace her footprints if the need arises. Mary not only kills her potential rapist but she also saves her society from further oppression. Suggesting suffering in silence is not Devi's forte, her women characters retaliate, refute, and reject. They struggle, survive and shed the burden of gender. The women of Devi transgress their gender roles. They prove that masculine roles-like hunting, starting a new adventure, acquiring knowledge-are not exclusive male dominated area. The women can also wield the weapon in case of any oppression.

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