



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Subaltern's Fantasy for Food in Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories

Krishnapada Mandal

Assistant Professor of English

Nistarini College, Purulia, West Bengal

Abstract: The paper seeks to investigate the literary representations of the subalterns and their fantasy for food in the select short stories of Mahasweta Devi. A close reading of the select short stories of Mahasweta Devi shows that the subaltern characters starve as they are denied food by the elite class. It is also marked that the subaltern characters fantasize about rice throughout their lives. The first part of the paper concentrates on defining the subaltern. The second part intensely analyses the selected short stories to show how the subalterns in Mahasweta Devi's texts are denied rice and how the subaltern characters fantasize about rice.

Keywords: Subaltern, Mahasweta Devi, Food, Fantasy, Rice.

As the *Oxford Concise Dictionary* defines, a subaltern is someone inferior in rank. The term subaltern is popularized by the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci. He, in his *Prison Notebooks* (1999), used the term in two senses. To avoid the government's censorship, he used the term to replace the word 'proletariat'. As he shows, a subaltern in a capitalist society is the working class. In addition to the term subaltern, Gramsci used another term—the 'hegemonic'. The term hegemonic refers to the capitalists or the bourgeois. In a capitalist society, the subaltern is exploited by the hegemonic group. Moreover, the term subaltern is used in a wider sense in Gramsci's writings. Not only in a capitalist society, Gramsci has also used the term while analysing other historical periods as well. Thus, the term subaltern does not confine itself to just indicating the working class. The term subaltern is rather used to refer to any group that remains the opposite of the dominant/elite class.

In the 1980s in India, a group of historians and intellectuals began to write about the subalterns. The historian Ranajit Guha led the Subaltern Studies Group. The chief aim of this group is to criticize the traditional historiography that is categorized as 'elitist' and 'nationalist' historiography. The protagonist of the elitist historiography is the dominant group as this kind of historiography imitates colonial historiography. In this kind of historiography, as Guha opines, the representations of the subalterns are either ignored or presented as subsidiary elements of history. Hence, the writers of the Subaltern Studies Group categorize the traditional historiography as 'incomplete', and hence, they began to restudy the existing historical documents and write and talk about the subalterns whose contributions to history were suppressed/ignored by the elitist historiographers. The subalternist historians mark how the elite/nationalist historiography could not recognize the autonomous identity—which is very much opposite to the elite—of the subaltern. The subalternist historians also claim that the subalterns had their own politics.

Another important concern of the subalternist scholars is to make the direction of history multidimensional. The nationalist historians' belief in nationalism directed them to monodimensionality, that is believing only in one group's contribution to the freedom movement. These subalternist historians observed this monodimensionality in the nationalist historiography and began to focus on the consciousness of the subalterns. These scholars gave importance to the fragmented historical elements or movements that the subalterns raised. Hence, the subaltern scholars engaged themselves in finding out the small voices of history.

To create the new historiography, the subalternist historians, as suggested by Ranajit Guha, gave importance to two ways (*Elementary Aspects* vii). Firstly, in Guha's view, the subalternist historiographers, going beyond the traditional sources of history, have to find the elements of history. They have to collect the elements for their history from people's lives—these elements may either be written or oral. The other objective of the subalternist historians is to restudy the elitist historical elements/documents. They should, as Guha opines, study those elements so consciously that they would discover the 'consciousness' of the subaltern that remains hidden under the consciousness of the elite.

Mahasweta Devi begins her literary career as a traditional writer. But later on, as a member of an activist family, she turns to document-based writing. Historical events, social movements, exploitation of marginalized groups etc. become the chief issues in her writings from the 1970s. This time onwards, she begins to write about the exploited people. In her later writings, the indigenous people remain at the centre of the text. She believes that a responsible writer must pen against the exploiter. In her "Palamau is a Mirror of India": An Introduction," says: The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies... My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system" (Devi ix). These exploiters fall into the group 'hegemonic'. This group holds social, economic and political power. On the other hand, powerless people are deprived of one of the most elementary things of life—food. The hegemonic group forces the subalterns to starve all through their lives. In Mahasweta Devi's writings, the power powerless/subaltern class becomes the mouthpiece. These writings of Devi explore how the subalterns are exploited by the elite, and in some cases, how the subalterns resist the elite's exploitation.

This paper's chief concern is to mark how the subalterns are denied basic foods like rice. As they are denied rice, they fantasize about boiled rice all through their lives. The short stories selected expose a common theme—the subaltern's fantasy about eating rice. To establish the arguments related to the deprivation of rice and fantasy about rice, this paper selects the following short stories of Mahasweta Devi—"Baan" (1968), "Bichaan" (1978), "Jatudhan" (1978), "Bhatua" (1980), and "Bhaat" (1982). As the first publication years of the selected short stories show, these stories were written during the 1970s and the 1980s. These two decades are significant for the political and economic upheaval. The Naxalite Movement of the 1970s influenced many of the writers of this time. Being influenced by this movement, Mahasweta Devi chooses the subjects of her writings that are related to fundamental issues like hunger and starvation. From this time, her literary activism begins to produce several significant texts that start questioning/raising voices against all kinds of exploitations. In most of these texts, food is frequently addressed. It has been observed that food plays a significant role in Mahasweta Devi's texts. In her texts, food is not something that is eaten only. Rather, its function welcomes multiple explanations. A close analysis of the short stories selected here would enable us to understand the relationship between food, especially rice, and subaltern.

In the short story “Baan” (The Flood) (1968), Mahasweta Devi describes how hunger demotivates the subaltern to be interested in religious matters. To the subaltern (here ‘low caste’) the spiritual flood is meaningless. It is heard that Chaitanyadev is going to visit the village and for that, a big *bhog* (a large treat) is going to be arranged for the common people by the upper caste. One of the chief aims of Chaitanyadev’s visit is to abolish casteism and communalism. Ironically, the so-called worshippers of Chaitanyadev believe in casteism and wish to linger their power posting their caste (here Brahmin) as superior. Chinibas, the Bagdi boy, represents the subaltern caste/class. To him, Chaitanyadev’s arrival is the arrival of various foods which he never gets in his family. He does not understand the ‘spiritual flood’, he understands only the ‘flood of food’— *thor*, *mocha*, gourd, leafy vegetables, milk, curd etc. The long-awaited visit of Chaitanyadev somehow fails. So, there is no arrangement of food except *muri* (puffed rice) and *batasa*. The story ends with the hopelessness of the subaltern. Mahasweta Devi puts a question on the system that never provides the basic needs of the subaltern.

As the story, “Baan” (1968) shows, Chinibas, the Bagdi boy does not get rice to eat. The boiled rice added with *daal*, vegetable curries and various recipes of fish is all he wants to grab all the time. One day, standing outside the house of a Brahmin family, he relishes the smell of boiling rice coming from the kitchen. He deeply thinks about the Brahmin woman’s mixing of ghee with *daal*. He wonders how the woman cooks *sukto* (a vegetable dish) of gourd adding milk and other ingredients to it. A *ghonto* (a kind of mixed vegetables) of radish, *bori* (a kind of dried ball made of pulses), and coconut. The smell of ghee and *sambar* (a kind of spice) creates a sensation in him. All these things remind him that he has not eaten rice for a long time. The elite’s cookery also reminds the subalterns that they are not allowed to these foods.

In the story “Paddy Seeds” (1999), Mahasweta Devi not only presents the exploitation of the subaltern by the elite/ powerful, but she also puts the resistance of the former toward the latter. Lachhman Singh represents the powerful class. On the other hand, Dulan, who belongs to the so-called lower-caste Ganju, represents the subaltern. Once Lachhman Singh gave Dulan a small portion of unproductive land. For this land, Dulan had to serve Lachhman Singh throughout his life. One day, in the presence of Dulan, Lachhman Singh shot two Ganju young men who raised their voices against the exploitation of the subaltern. Singh forced Dulan to be silent about the murder. But the pain within him gets heavier day by day. In the meantime, Asrafi and three of his followers are shot dead for creating agitation against Lachhman Singh. The cause of agitation was the low wages of the labourers. Once again, in the presence of Dulan, the four dead bodies are engraved. Though imprisoned, Lachhman gets freed immediately. Again, an agitation is erected and now seven people are shot dead. Among them, Dhatua, Dulan’s son, is one. Dulan cannot tolerate it anymore. He kills Lachhman Singh and throws the dead body into a ditch. Dulan’s protest and revenge signify the resisting power of the subaltern.

The upper-caste people like Lachman Singh occupy a large area of productive land where they grow paddy, corn, wheat, *maroa*, mustard etc. They also occupy unproductive land where nothing grows. By giving this kind of unproductive land Lachman Singh buys the labour of the people like Dulan the lower caste man. Dulan’s wife Shanichari dreams that one day she will have enough rice to cook. As Devi describes in her story “Paddy Seeds”, “She would...find herself seated in a chair drinking buttermilk and cooking rice for two meals a day” (Devi 161). The people around Dulan give him various suggestions to utilize that unproductive land he received from Lachman Singh. He is advised to take the help of the Block Development Office. The paddy seeds, meant for sowing, allotted to him by the BDO, are boiled to get rice out of it. The rice that got out of the seeds fulfils Dulan’s dream of eating rice for the time being. But it cannot be a permanent solution. By transforming paddy seeds into rice, Dulan pacifies his hunger for the time being. He suffers from hunger so deeply that he says— “If we die from eating seed paddy, we’ll at least know that we had a meal of rice before dying. We’ll go straight to heaven” (Devi 165).

“Jatudhan” (1979) is another short story in which the protagonist Sajua represents the subaltern. Sajua becomes the Jatudhan, a monster, for his hunger and overeating. During the *shraddha* (obsequial rites) of Ram Singi’s mother Sajua ate meals of ten persons. From that day he was named Jatudhan. He was an able-bodied strong man. So, he was appointed by Ram Singi to do hard work. His hard work turned the unproductive lands of Ram Singi into productive ones. One day when it was declared that there would be a flood, and for that reason all the common people took shelter in the summer house of Ram Singi, Sajua had to look after the crops in the field of Ram Singi. He was floated on that flood. Hearing that, his mother and wife demanded one sack of rice for organizing the *shraddha* of Sajua. Only a sack of rice brought sleep to their eyes. But on the night, they found that Sajua was alive and came back home. After hearing everything, he left home with his mother and wife for some distant unknown place. Thus, Mahasweta Devi shows the exploitation of the subalterns and their resistance toward the upper class.

For a small amount of rice, Sajua takes the risk of being drowned in the flood. The thought of rice keeps him so busy that he forgets about the possibility of his death. He sits on the machan to look after the paddy field of Ram Singi in the time of flood. He is given puffed rice and gruel to eat at night. He is happy and satisfied with the food items he is given. Once the flood washes him away. He does not come back home. The family members and others thought that Sajua was dead. His family holds *shraddha*. Sajua’s family was given a sack of rice for holding Sajua’s last rites. Keeping their hands on the sack of rice, Sajua’s mother and wife fell asleep. To them, the sack of rice seems to be Sajua himself. They never saw such a huge amount of rice in their life. For some moment, they forget about Sajua’s existence. They feel that they have got that rice that they dreamt of throughout their life. As if their fantasy about rice comes true. Rice plays the role of a pacifier here. The subalterns like Sajua and his family members are forced to embrace hunger for so long a time their anger is easily pacified by the upper-caste landed people like Ram Singi with an offer of a small amount of rice.

Written during the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of the short stories of Mahasweta Devi are based on the lives of the subaltern. In the short story “Bhatua” (1980), Devi presents how in post-independence India the custom of *betbegari* (wage-less job) continued openly. The fundamental rights are only in pen and paper. In reality, the powerless people are subordinated and exploited by the powerful. The upper-class zamindars lend money to the ‘lower class’ in crucial situations. Their debt never ends. To repay the debt the subalterns have to serve the zamindars for their whole life without any wage. They are given only one meal of rice in a day. For another half of the day, they work without food. Paban is trapped in this *bhatua* system. His father borrowed eight hundred rupees from the Gorainbabus. Working day and night with half food, he became blind but the debt never ended. In the end, he takes revenge upon the Gorain by destroying the stored paddy. His anger leads him to resist. Thus, the exploited subaltern uplifts its power against the powerful.

“Bhaat” (Rice) (1982) is another such story in which the protagonist Uchchhab Naiya represents the subaltern. He lost his house and family members in a natural disaster. To find his wife and daughter he did not eat for two days. Hoping to have food, he goes to Kolkata with a woman from his village, Basini. Basisni helped him get appointed as a timber-cutter in the family of a wealthy man. The old man of that family was on the verge of death. There were all kinds of arrangements such as chanting of tantric and other such things to keep the old man alive. To have rice, hungry Uchchhab cuts a lot of timber. After waiting a long time for the rice, he was asleep. When he was awake, he found that the old man died and all the food items were thrown away. He snatched the large rice pot from Basini’s hands and grabbed the rice and was arrested. Through the character of Uchchhab, Mahasweta Devi attacks the socio-cultural system which does not allow the subaltern one of the basic needs, food.

The wealthy family stores a number of sacks of various types of rice. A particular kind of rice is cooked and served with particular kinds of dishes, such as the cooked rice of Jhingashal rice is served with veg *daal* and other veg curries, whereas, the cooked rice of Ramshal rice is served with fish curry and the like. Every member of that wealthy family has his own kind of fascination for a particular kind of rice. As described in the story, five types of rice are cooked every day for the different members of that wealthy family. Hearing about this, Uchchhab wonders and cannot believe that there can be such a place in the world where so many types of rice are available. The stock of the rice reminds him of his own starvation. He says: "So long a time, I have not eaten rice cooked at home" (my translation, Devi 211). He is too much hungry while cutting the timber he was told to cut. He waits for the meal of rice. The smell of boiling rice draws all his attention. He fantasizes about rice all the time. As Devi describes in her story, Uchchhab has to be transformed into a 'phantom', and he will regain all his human feelings if gets rice to eat. He will also be able to think about his son and wife whom he lost in the time of the flood in Sundarban. The desire of eating rice keeps his mind so busy that he steals the pot of cooked rice which is thrown in the dustbin. The pot of cooked rice with all other dishes is thrown into the dustbin as the tantric advises the family members to throw it away as the Buro Karta (the old man) has died. At the end of the story, Uchchhab is arrested as he steals the thrown-away cooked rice. His desire to eat rice was so deep that he could not restrain himself from eating the forbidden food. Thus, like in other short stories, the rice fantasy of the subaltern is propagated by the elite.

The short stories discussed above have one common theme. The protagonists of all these short stories are subalterns. All of them are exploited by the elite. All of them are denied food/rice, and hence, forced to fantasize about food/rice. The analyses of these short stories open a new scope for reading Mahasweta Devi's text from the perspective of food studies.

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