

Making The Subaltern Speak In The Fiction Of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract: This paper tries to locate Mahasweta's aesthetics of *feminist ethno-mythography* as a counter to the aesthetics of *historiography* through an aesthetic-political reading of *The Book of Hunter, Pterodactyl, PuranSahay and Pirtha, Bayen and Seeds*. Ranajit Guha observes that the dominant strand of "elite" nationalism obfuscated the history of non-mainstream nationalisms. The elitist and exclusivist pedagogic apparatus of Colonial historiography has led to the abjection of non-conformist strands of nationalism. Mahasweta Devi's *Titu Mir* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, mark the return of the repressed as through her "fiction" she recuperates the lost history of tribal insurgency which fuelled the anticolonial resistance. However in her later works such as *Pterodactyl, PuranSahay and Pirtha, Bayen* and *The Book of Hunter*, Mahasweta shifts her attention to the social reproduction and reconstitution of the hegemonic (post)colonial regime in the post independent nation state without becoming what Spivak calls a "Native Informant". Mahasweta explodes the homogeneity of this unruptured narrative of postcolonial modernity by showing the *illegitimacy of decolonisation* in a nation state which continues to remain in the ideological grips of Neo-colonial state machinery. Mahasweta counteracts and delegitimises the elite nationalist narrative of postcolonial modernity which appropriates difference, by the proliferation of ethnographic heterogeneity in her works, be it the Santhals, Oraons, Dusads, Ganjus, Bhils, Bhangis, Doms or Kamiyas. The Neo Colonial state reinstates discursive practices of "otherness" governed by material relations of power by withholding constitutional entitlements and privileges from the aboriginals or Tribals in Palamau, Daltonganj, Murhai, Seho or Kuruda. The tribal heroes of anticolonial insurgency are replaced now by these postcolonial tribal "heroines" such as Mary Oraon, Dhoulis and Chandibayen who resist political abjection and fracture the unitary and homogeneous narrative of decolonisation by exploding their hybrid, mutant, contaminated, racialised and sexualised "otherness". Their insurrectionary subjectivity emerges in the forms of tribal songs and occult practices which though not embedded in postcolonial history still operate as *Ur-texts* for the aboriginal culture. The gendered subaltern subject rejects the grand narrative of bourgeois nationalism; their aboriginal narratives of myths genealogically transmitted counteract elite political and aesthetic structures of representation and serves as a counterpoint to the erasure of the tribal woman from both colonial archives and hegemonic bourgeois nationalist discourses. In the semantics of capitalist forms of representation, the tribal woman is *unrepresentable*; Chandis, the gendered subaltern and the Pterodactyl, the aboriginal spectre challenge this semiotic inscription through a discursive proliferation of "Negative" otherness.

Keywords: subaltern, postcolonial, aboriginal, historiography, ethnographic

I would like to locate Mahasweta's aesthetics of *feminist ethno-mythography* as counteracting the aesthetics of *historiography*. A Bengali *Mangalkavya* set in sixteenth century; *Chandimangal* documents the lives of a hunting tribe, Shabars who consider themselves the progeny of the forest goddess, Abhayachandi. Shabars are a pre-agrarian social formation; their history predates the arrival of feudal agrarian modes of production and thus poses a challenge to the postcolonial historian's Eurocentric modes of historical production. In a unique historical recovery of the *Originary Ur-text's* moment of inception, Mahasweta reimagines the Brahmin poet, Mukundaram struggling to write his epic poem since he is an outsider to the forest; he befriends a young tribal couple Phulli and Kalya who allow him access to the oral history of Shabars, the forest's original inhabitants or *adi-vasis* as Kalya's mother, Tejotia is the oracle of Abhayachandi and the daughter of the tribal chieftain DankoShabar. Mahasweta's reconstruction of the lost tribal history *through* subaltern voices and not *by* Mukundaram's ventriloquizing voice serves as a critique of postcolonial representations of subaltern history. Mukunda's anthropological project of turning Kalya into a Native Informant resembles the orientalist historiography of cartographer Colin Mackenzie, who according to Nicholas Dirks carried out an extensive survey of Mysore relying exclusively on Native Informants to produce an "authentic" anthropological survey of Deccan India.

Underlying history is a prediscursive teleological ordering of narrative towards completion, Mahasweta overturns the structure of contemporary anthropology since by the time *The Book of Hunter* ends, the historian Mukunda has not even begun writing his epic. The book's epilogue closes with "He wrote in bold letters, 'Byadhkhanda –The Book of Hunter: The First Day'. Mukunda kept writing...." thus abruptly terminating before it formally begins. Mahasweta's derivative text deliberately frustrates the male historian's search for beginnings because his frames of reference cannot comprehend tribal origins. Mahasweta expands a small incident like Phullora's search for blue *gandharaj* flower into its prehistory, the rivalry between Brahmins and the Shabars when King Kalketu sinfully offered blue *gandharaj* stained with blood from hunter's clothes to Abhayachandi on Durgashtami. This infinitely expanding range of prehistories with each story retroactively marking a new version of tribal beginnings is something the original *Mangalkavya* obscures. Thus, Mahasweta's *ethno-mythology* is written *retrospectively* but its ending is

prospectively open for the originary narrative, *Chandimangal's* creation; she invites readers to comprehend *Chandimangal* from the standpoint of *The Book of Hunter's* end and hence in a historical reversal, *The Book of Hunter* becomes the originating *Ur-text*.

The multiple authorship of Shabar history and its heteroglossic nature eludes the imperious structuring authority of the Postcolonial historian Mukunda; the shifting imbalances of power have much to do with the double focalisation as there are two authors –the male postcolonial historian, Mukunda and Mahasweta, the feminist *Ethno-mythographer*. The aboriginal practices of self-representation embedded in the poetics of *Panchali* (Bengali devotional lyric which is formally rambling) of *Jaguli Manasha*, the protecting deity against snakes or the lyric forms eulogising tribal deities like *Baghut Thakur*, who protects from tigers are unavailable to Mukunda since their meaning is untranslatable and untransferrable.

Sivaramakrishnan finds the subaltern as a disappearing subject in subaltern historiography; either in its imagining of the subaltern as a romantic rebel or as:

existing in the subterfuges and stereotypes of dominant discourse as shadowy figure stripped of independent existence by relocating subalternity as recalcitrant difference not outside but inside elite discourses that subordinate it” (Ludden, 2002: 240-243).¹

One can see Mahasweta anticipating this failure of historic representation in Mukunda's historicisation. Mahasweta's *historical* novel asks, why the subaltern cannot be written into history? History is the discourse of self-mastery, of the bourgeois individual but the subaltern (subject without identity) has no monolithic identity as there is no unitary identification with the nation-state. The Shabars derive their identity from virgin forests and not nation-state. The subaltern subject is not unified but rather multiple, communal and not individual. Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Subaltern History as Political Thought* identifies the subaltern as a political anomaly who challenges Eurocentric assumptions of constitutional subjecthood. Is the subaltern a historical subject proper or a schizophrenic subject in the making? “Is he a collective subject or a collection of individuals, a transcendent unity or a mob?” (Chakrabarty, 2011: 209). Chakrabarty accuses the postcolonial historian of a methodological violence by making individuals speak for collective acts performed by a community. I see the death of Kalya (who alone can retrieve the cultural knowledge of the tribe) and the migration of his mother Tejotia (who has inscribed this cultural knowledge in the world outside *written history*), as a narrative necessity since it terminates channels of communication between the historian and his subject and eternally defers his paternalistic enterprise of *representing* them.

For Mahasweta, the feminist ethnographer, the subaltern is a subject not constituted *in* history but *through* stories, in an interview given to Spivak, Mahasweta calls tribal history *galpakatha*/story; the aboriginal is not constitutive of the decolonised nation but constative of its illegitimacy. The aboriginal self has not emerged into history yet as history-making is the unravelling of a delimiting self-consciousness. Mukunda tries to extract knowledge of the tribe from Kalya assuming that historical retrieval can be accomplished through individual acts of remembrance, but for the Shabars cultural knowledge is never individual. *The Book of Hunter* restores the performative nature of collective Shabar history by preserving the polymorphous nature of aboriginal lives. Mukunda's attempts are reminiscent of a romantic fabulation of tribal history as he attempts to re-fashion the communal protagonist into an individual hero. Kalya's failure and death in the novel undercuts the conventional heroics of individual selfhood with which Mukunda wants to invest his romantic historical fabulation. Thus Mahasweta invents a new *aesthetics* of *ethno-mythography* which emulates tribal oral forms of *repetition* –King Kalketu is named after Kalpeshwar Shiva and rechristened Meghbahan, Tejotia's husband is named after Megha and her son named Kalya/Kalachand after Kalketu .

Balkrishna Renke's 2008 report for National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes attempts to classify many tribes branded as criminal under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The report identifies greater incidence of sexual violence against nomadic and tribal women; but ironically claims to identify such cases not from police complaints but *literature*. But Mahasweta's literature disproves such bureaucratic stereotypes. In Shabar community, the wife freely thrashes the belligerent husband and can leave him to remarry whenever she wants. Ashis Nandy has theorised about more permissible and fluid models of gender in indigenous societies prior to the imposition of inflexible androcentric gendered positions under colonialism which were culturally produced in Europe. This gender indeterminacy is still visible among the Shabars, Oraons and Mundas.

In *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha*, Puran, the BDO of Pirtha-Dholki-Gabahi-Derha-Madhola-Pungarh, tries to represent the ancient being through language but his rhetorical agency cannot capture the pterodactyl's “smell” and “gaze”. Bikhia's engravings seamlessly merge with cave paintings of his ancestors showing organic *merging* and not historical *categorising* of ancient civilisation with the present. While Bikhia's carvings denote the aesthetics of *primal revisitation/rememoration* as an untranslatable *Ur-text*; Puran's desire to “photograph” Bikhia's carvings or taxonomically classify the pterodactyl denotes what Deleuze calls *enregistrement* (production of a prior recording process).

The pterodactyl, an extinct species of flying reptile constitutes a missing link in the paleontological evolution of birds from reptiles; Mahasweta politicises the anthropological evolution as a historical transition since like the pterodactyl, the aboriginal remains a missing link in the transition from precolonial victimhood to postcolonial subjecthood. Like the pterodactyl, the *adivasi* is an anthropological aberration, since he has not *evolved* into the figure of the *nagarik* (metropolitan citizen). Unlike the postcolonial *registering* subject, the *adivasi* is a *resisting* subject. A paralogical figure, untouched by transformative agency of

both colonial modernity and postcolonial liberalism of bourgeois political economy; the *adivasi* inhabits a liminal space between mythology and history, feudalism and global capitalism, bond slavery and emancipated citizenship between which there can be no established traffic. The postcolonial historian, Puran brings the broadest range of anthropological and epistemological modes of comprehension to explain the pterodactyl's existence only to confront the limits of postcolonial reason. Puran realises that with his postcolonial modes of historical representation, he is a "newcomer in the history of earth's evolution". The *adivasi* as the original inhabitant of the earth predates contemporary epistemological systems like anthropology and archaeology. Subaltern history is eccentric; the re-birth of the pterodactyl reverses the temporal *sequentiality* of history's onward march to *simultaneity* as the ancestral soul does not evolve but cohabits with the present. Having witnessed primordial history, before the advent of modern man and experienced geological extinction; the pterodactyl also carries *knowledge of futurity* as it warns of the sociologically induced extinction of tribal ways of life.

The etymological roots of *adi* in the designative signifier, *adivasi* can be traced to *adim*, meaning primitive and the pterodactyl is not an allegorical manifestation but a corporeally materialised embodiment of this primitive civilisation. Is the pterodactyl a teratological aberration *sui generis*? Or does its arrival mark the vanishing point of postcolonial history? Perhaps the historical knowledge which the modern day aboriginal, Bikhia inherits from the pterodactyl is the lost history of tribal insurgency and its heroes like Titu Mir who led one of the first anti-colonial agitations in Bengal in 1830 before his conversion to the Wahabi sect or Baba TirkaMajhi who led the first Santhal rebellion in 1780 or BirsaMunda of Chhotanagpur in Bihar who carried out a tribal movement which culminated in the armed uprising or *Ulgulan* of 1899-1900.

Spivak makes a distinction between *vertetung* which she identifies as representation as replacement, substitution or supplementation as opposed to *darstellung* which means representation as re-presenting or placing there. Bikhia's cave painting like Mahasweta's feminist ethnography is aware of its status as re-presentation or *darstellung*; Bikhia's muteness is not enforced *silencing of the subaltern* but a withholding of indigenous knowledge as assertion of ethnic identity and privilege. RanajitGuha's observation that:

the Western observer regarded withholding of indigenous knowledge as assertion of ethnicity as it excluded him as an alien. The fear generated by want of access to what he thought was his by virtue of racial superiority, could be compensated by generalisation about natives. So, he turned to history as ethnology's surrogate

(Guha 1997: 163-163)²

proves instructive in explaining my point. It is in this sense I contrast Mahasweta's *sethnography* to Puran and Mukunda's chronologizing machinery of *history*.

In both; *Pterodactyl*, *PuranSahay and Pirtha* and *The Book of Hunter* I see an ethical conflict between the resistant ethnographic narrative of *adivasi* life and the hegemonic nationalist narrative of a postcolonial historian. Unlike, the postcolonial historians PuranSahay or Mukundaram, aspiring towards to a mimetic verisimilitude in their recording of tribal lives, the feminist *ethno-mythographer* Mahasweta alerts us to the rhetorical underpinnings and fictional nature of her work in the afterword to the novel, "I have deliberately conflated the ways and customs of different tribal groups....through the myth of the pterodactyl. – *Mahasweta Devi*". But ironically, by subsuming ethnographic heterogeneity and the disparate cultural dispensations of different and diversified tribal communities such as *Bhil, Dusad, Kamia or Hounder* the monolithic category of *tribal*, Mahasweta imposes a Universalist abstraction upon an otherwise political formation.

In *Bayen*, the heroine replaces Mahasweta as the *feminist ethno-mythographer*. In Postcolonial spaces like Sonadonga and Dhubulia; the ritualised embeddedness and cultural sway of mythology wrestles with modernity. In a privative appropriation of mythology; Chandidasi evokes the legacy of being the daughter of the renowned Kalu Dom who gave shelter to the exiled King Harishchandra and a *Gangaputri* since like Ganga she too washes away ritualised pollution. This *Urnarrative* functions as an originary genealogical narrative locating her gendered subaltern identity at a precise moment. In the scriptural tradition of India, this myth is still used to explain away the peculiarity of the Dom community's untouchable labour thus proving its persisting cultural currency. Chandi's self-generated mythology of belonging to the lineage of Kalu Dom who established his dominion over all the burning ghats of the world counteracts the social script of stigmatisation. Chandi's mythopoesis resists the nationalist narrative of historical development and its phallogocentric drive which has interpolated her husband who attempts to erase his "untouchability" through social mobility. This en(gendering) of personal history is not a postmodern *écriture féminine* but aboriginal *écriturehistorié*.

Both Chandi and the Pterodactyl explode the historical linearity of what Chakrabarty calls *Developmental Time*. The arrival of the Pterodactyl marks the definitive moment when the *primeval* re-emerges in the *postcolonial*; Puran, the postcolonial historian bears testament to the moment when *prehistory* intrudes upon *history*. It is a moment of silent postcolonial witnessing which has not been inscribed in the official archives of Modern India; it is a moment invested with postcolonial *differance*, since the pterodactyl's *differing* subjectivity is untranslatable and hence eternally *deferred* within Mahasweta's novel. The historical operations of modernity have transformed the subject under colonialism into the citizen within post-colony. Similarly there is a seamless transition from pre-capitalist tribal formations to transnational operations of global capitalism. Both these processes are accomplished by the operations of *neo-colonialism*. Chandi, the gendered subaltern as mythical *spectre* within postcolony and the pterodactyl, as prehistoric mythical *apparition* in historical time of developmental capitalism, disrupt the linearity of these twin

transitions. Through these two mythical spectres, Mahasweta exposes the *illegitimacy* of metropolitan-centric decolonisation. The aboriginal social rituals of seasonal hunt, migration signal the performative nature of *adivasi* cultural semantics; for them history is not monumentalised but re-enacted through bodily rituals and practices of cultural survival and is therefore *Lived History*. Mahasweta turns the metaphor of tribal history as lived reality literal; *history comes alive* as a Corporeal figuration embodying the lost ethnographic knowledge of the *adivasis* before the advent of modern archaeology. Both Chandi, the socio-ethnic gendered mutant and the pterodactyl as embodiment of ancestral soul are unnameable archetypes; they are both terrible and terrifying spectres for the metropolitan citizen. Modern history has no point of reference for them, both the ancient reptile and the tribal woman are unknowable, beyond the linguistic and cultural limits of history and thus *un-representable*. Also, like the reptilian monster, the female body by virtue of phallic lack is anatomically monstrous. The transference of knowledge from ancestral soul to pterodactyl to Bikhia and from Abhayachandi to forest to DankoShabar to Tejotia shows a mode of communication/dissemination which eludes the exploratory mechanisms of the historians, Puran and Mukunda.

Cultural knowledge of the tribes is dispersed in an extra-textual field like subaltern subjectivity which is decentered and deterritorialised and thus *exceeds* modes of textual re-production. Both Chandi and the pterodactyl, mark the return of the repressed subaltern history as spectre. Chandi as her name suggests denotes the forbidding aspect of female energy; cast away into the primal darkness of the forest she becomes a vengeful and fearsome figuration of the Freudian id, the archetypal female principal who poses the threat of castration to the male historian. Similarly the pterodactyl embodies the resurfacing of the primal and the barbaric within the unconscious of postcolonial history onto its consciousness. Both mark the limitations of the male historian's cognitive faculty; the more Puran and Mukunda try to view these archetypes heuristically, the more forcefully they grasp the limits of empiricism. Just as there can be no communication between pterodactyl and Puran, there can be no communication between the gendered subaltern non-subject and the postcolonial metropolitan citizen.

In an interview to Spivak, Mahasweta observed that lacking a script Tribals weave events into songs thus making *history a continuum*. In *Bichhan* (Seeds), DulanGanju's song is an ethnographic performance of folk memory.

Where has Karan gone? And Bulaki? Where is Ashrafi and his brother Mohar? Where are Mahuban and Paras? They are lost in police files. Karan fought the 25-paisa battle. Ashrafi fought the five rupees 40-paisa battle. All lost in police files, lost" (Devi 1998: 44-45)³

These peasant rebels invisible in nationalist history belong to the *Dusad, Chamar, Ganju, Oraon, Munda* and *Dhobi* community in Tamadih, Burudiha, Kuruda, Hesadi and Dhai. With every new stanza, a new generation of tribal insurgents are woven into the interminable historical narrative of the song. Dulan's intergenerational song shows an alternative mode of representation in which unaffiliated/unrepresented bodies of peasants are embedded in feudal systems of economic transformations, thus displaying a unique bodily materiality of history. Perhaps this is a *Neo-Deleuzean Desiring-Production* in which peasant subjectivity is rooted in geographical materialism. Epistemological modes of capitalism see historical subjectivity of the bourgeois as dematerialised abstraction; Dulan's *sgaan* (song) which becomes *dhaan* (seeds) inaugurates a new counter-discourse by materialisation of tribal subjectivity through its rootedness in land ownership, literally sowing "seeds" of subaltern history in the epistemic fields since *Bichhan* carrying phonetic resonance with *bichaana* (laying down) sows/shows genesis of history and not its archiving.

Tribal history gets embodied in the semantic body of Dulan's song, the ethnographic *Ur-text*; Kristeva in *Revolutions in Poetic language* sees this reinsertion of the body into the signifying process of language, as a resurfacing of the semiotic drives, the maternal and Pre-linguistic into the socio-symbolic. Mainstream academic history in its pursuit of temporality is framed by epistemological structures of capitalism and can never comprehend the embodied nature of Dulan's ethnographic performance. Dulan's song unlike postcolonial history valorises no single hero but the basis of production of peasant radicalism. From Tohri to Burudiha, rail tracks are laid and the SDO according to jurisdiction prepares "cases involving atrocities against *adivasis* and *harijans* for court". Police files stands for official archives and repression of tribal insurgency against entrenched feudalism which are recuperated by Dulan's song.

Endnotes

1. K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project"; pp. 240
2. Ranajit Guha, Three Types of Narrative in *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*; pp. 162
3. *Seeds in Bitter Soil*: pp. 44

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