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Social Revelations Through Voices At The Fringe: Mahasweta Devi's *Old Women*

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi is a vital segment of India's indigenous literature. She is an activist cum writer who has carried a tireless crusade working, fighting and writing for the marginalized. Her writings render the excruciating dilemmas of humans at the social-periphery. Her works have been widely read and translated for their poignant themes and social commitment. Published in 1979, *Old Women* by Mahasweta Devi is a collection of two stories "Murti" (Statue) and "Mohanpurer Rupkatha" (The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur) that unveils the societal oppression encountered by the two women protagonists - Dulali and Andi. These stories were translated into English by Columbia University Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1999. Mahasweta Devi was honoured with the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997. The present paper shall analyse *Old Women* in the light of the above given statement. The significance of these stories as an effective tool to define identity and existence of the otherwise deprived beings shall be enlisted. Mahasweta Devi's fine understanding of the marginalised psyche and her belief that those on the fringes cannot be heard till they speak shall be established. An attempt shall also be made to view that how the stories of the *Old Women* reveal the social matrix and construct a subaltern's perspective. The negative impact of exploitation and neglect that reduces people to a subhuman existence and the need to give voice to the voiceless shall be the major concern of this paper.

Index terms: **Marginalized, oppression, voice, subaltern, social commitment, crusade.**

English Literature was proclaimed to be an esoteric realm till the advent of translations brought to fore the regional subaltern narratives that exposed the hypocrisy of those who had positioned themselves at the privileged centre. The native cultures and traditions had been relegated to the margins on the pretext of 'inferiority'. On the contrary, the truth was that the variance of these perspectives was beyond comprehension for those at the 'centre'. Over a period of time these unheard voices became significant because of their ability to acquaint the reader with the socially, politically, economically and culturally ostracized. These, so far unheard voices, not only attempted to understand the psyche of the marginalized but also divulged the entire fabric of the system that was responsible for their victimization. In the introduction to *Old Women*, translator Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak points out, "Weaving history, myth and current political realities, these stories explore troubling motifs in contemporary Indian life through the figures and narratives of indigenous tribes in India." Prof. Shubha Tiwari echoes this observation while citing Devi's acceptance speech at her felicitation during Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997 to indicate the social relevance of her literature:

> My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from poor and the deprived. But then, why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.

Mahasweta Devi, one of India' s foremost literary figures, recipient of Sahitya Akademi (1979), Jnanpith (1996), Ramon Magsaysay Award(1997), the title of Officier del Ordre Des Arts Et Des Lettres (2003), the Nonino Prize (2005), and the Padmashree (1986) has performed deftly the dual roles as a writer and as an activist among the dispossessed tribal communities. She was born in 1926 in Dhaka, to literary parents, in a Hindu Brahmin family. Her first schooling was in Dhaka, but after the partition of India she moved to West Bengal in India. She joined the Rabindranath Tagore-founded Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan and completed B.A. (Hons) in English, and then M.A. in English at Calcutta University. A turning point came in 1965 when she visited Palamau, a remote and impoverished district in Bihar that she calls "a mirror of tribal India". ("Suffering She").

Moving from place to place on foot, she witnessed the savage impact on indigenous society of absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect. She subsequently observed the same dismal conditions in other tribal districts of India. There was no education, no health care, no roads, and no income. It was here that she encountered the horrific misery of a people largely excluded from the documented, mainstream history. Nandini Sen observes that this point onwards Devi decided to record the tales of woe and anguish of the marginalized in literature along with substantial social work for their upliftment.

Old Women is about two women who suffer because of their tertiary position in a socio-political system that relegates old people, especially women, to an oblivious existence. Dulali in "Murti" is a lonely old woman from Chhatim village jostling to satiate her hunger while she is haunted by the bronze statue of her dead lover – the freedom fighter, Dindayal Thakur - installed in the village fifty years after his death. In "The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur", Andi loses her eyes owing to the damaging influence of an oppressive system that is insensitive towards the plight of the dispossessed. The narrative in both cases offers a powerful critique of the cannibalistic socio-political structure. The first story "Murti" or "Statue" exhibits social exploitation of Brajdulali alias Dulali. The narrative moves back and forth in time to bring the reader the tale of a child- widow who is treated as an outcast by her own family and compelled to live an obliterated existence. Analyzing the victim's position the writer questions:

> Does she belong to this house? If close kin, then why outcast? If not kin, then why is she in the house? If the decision is not to feed her, then why give? If one feels like feeding, why give such a small amount of rice? (Old Women13).

A young naxal, Dindayal Thakur, falls in love with her and tries hard to bring cheer to her colourless life. He even offers marriage but Dulali refuses out of fear of violating societal parameters laid down for widows and the subsequent repercussions. As time passes this bond begins to lose its sheen and Dindayal is finally convinced by his family to marry a girl from their own community. On the day of wedding he fails to suppress his true sentiments and all hell breaks loose. He runs away to city, joins the naxal movement and is eventually killed fighting the British. His father is the priest of Dulali's family deity. He is deeply anguished by the death of his son. Throwing away the idol in his master's courtyard he curses Dulali holding her responsible for the death of his son. Poor girl, she is a victim of pseudo socio- religious beliefs and has to bear the entire brunt of wrath, both from her brother Sadanand and from Dindayal's father. Then on her life becomes an endless journey for 'mere survival'. She gathers her food and fends for herself in the absolute absence of any resources till the advent of her nephew- Nabin.

Devi weaves the events from the life of Dulali into a story that reveal layer by layer the social systems that have collectively and methodically succeeded in keeping certain segments out of the main motif of power structure. Describing Chattim village, Devi writes:

> …not 30 literate persons in the eight villages. The literate are as occupied with filling their bellies as the illiterate. Nobody takes or reads a paper. The nearest police station is 11 miles away. The district town is seven miles away. (Old Women 1)

Apart from ignorance another factor that keeps the people out of the central motif is their difficult lives as share-croppers and casual labourers. This peripheral position has been since ages because "…the village has remained as sunk in the darkness of ignorance, poverty and underdevelopment" (OW 68) as had been left by Dindayal Thakur during the times of British. Nabin tells the Minister:

> You know, when Dinu Thakur left the village, there was no *school*, no road, and we lit our lamps with mahua-fruit oil. There still is nothing in the village, the difference being we light paraffin. (OW 71).

This stark reality about the backwardness of the village is an integral part of the story and the plight of an entire section of marginal is laid bare along with the individual trauma of Dulali. The contour of the story sheds light

on the precarious lives at the fringe. Duli is a picture of utter neglect. Her first image is given in the following words:

> She looks like the Manosha-crone of myths. White hair, torn clothes, emaciated body….Long ago, a long time back, she forgot to protest against others' behavior towards herself. She has accepted Hunger pangs as *chronic* and unalterable reality. She died, possibly, long ago.(OW12-13).

This harmless creature becomes the centre of attention when a research scholar finds a letter written by the freedom fighter Dindayal Thakur. The contents of this paper make it clear that the man had to face some "…ferocious opposition from rural society, and he loved this woman. It seems as if unrequited love and participation in revolutionary activities were interdependent." (OW 18).

The onus of victimization laid solely on the power structure that deliberately chose to forget the deprived. The silenced life of Dulali finally gets its voice when at the ripe age of seventy – eight she is asked to recall her life and give her perspective on Dinu. She finds her 'voice' and interrogates her fault in the entire sequence of events for which she was punished so harshly. Contemplating on the past she tells Nabin, "I'm thrown in a corner with less power than field-cattle….Tell your dad, Nabin, not to torture me anymore. I'm ready to live in a shack upon this river-bed in the woods." (OW 26-27).

The hanging of Dinu in 1924 lived in the minds of villagers as a folk tale. Thus there were different versions of it. The most pertinent version was that of Dulali, since she was the one whom Dinu addressed in major part of his letter. The entire sequence of events is pieced together with the help of Nabin. However, fifty-four years after the life shattering episode, Duli is more concerned about her present than her past. "At 78, the body becomes such that today's unappeased hunger appears much more than the unrequited love of the past."(OW 28). Survival overshadows everything else because the urge to continue living engages absolutely. "…undone by ceaseless worry about food, she cannot think of anything more good than today's chickpea powder, tomorrow's crushed parched rice."(OW 28). The irony of her life is indicated when Dasu Soren tells her, "Your problem is that you're a king's daughter. Nothing to eat, yet you can't beg, most dangerous." (OW 28). Belonging to the royal family had been her bane.

Married at four and widowed at six, Dulai is subjected to oblivion even before she becomes conscious of her existence as a breathing and alive human being. The social practices of her community, which is ruthlessly against widows and love, put her at the fringe where she has no one to fall back on. She is kept away from auspicious celebrations, not permitted to look in the mirror, not braid her hair, and fear the word 'love'. This word meant violence in the community. She refuses Dinu's proposal not because she does not love him but because she was a widow from a lower caste. Gradually she realizes that loving Dinu was not a crime and she had no reason to be guilty. Still she tells him, "With her head held high…regally at ease, I love you, will love you as long as I live. But nothing will come of this love of ours in this life. Get married."(OW 42). Unfortunately, she fails to foresee his reaction and when he dies, "Day and night she thought, why didn't I listen to him, why didn't I leave,...for whose pride and respect, did I say 'no' to him?"(OW 47). The internal pain of Dulali did not matter to anyone because she was a woman and a widow. Time moved on and "Everything became a lie. The aching belly remained, and the tedium of passing each day?...She had lived too long, time has gone on, leaving her behind."(OW 48-49).

"Statue" also gives voice to the poor villagers who are not connected to the advanced life in the urban areas. Nabin's dream of bringing a road to the village is a symbol of connecting the 'centre' to the 'margin'. "By that road the laboring masses of the village will travel to the outside world with the goods produced by their sweat, and come back smiling to the village with the wealth gained from their labour."(OW 52-53).

Dulali sees the present through Nabin's eyes. She keeps away the piece of cloth that he brings for her to be worn on the day of the unveiling of Dinu's statue. He becomes as necessary to her as Dinu, "…in another shape."(OW 58). At the same time Nabin too is moved by her plight:

> Pishi is like neglected soil. She looks cracked and dry like thirsty neglected soil. She still doesn't know how to complain. Just as thirsty soil, begging love, dresses itself in grass with just a bit of water, Pishi too wants to pour herself out with just a lisle love from Nabin…Pishi complains about nothing . Pishi came only to endure. (OW 58-59).

Devi assigns a voice to Dulali that is firm and realistic. Her condition is emblematic of societal oppression of widows in modern India that can no longer accuse the White Man for all the problems. Here is a narrative that compels self- introspection and presses the significance of representing every segment of the structure regardless of the hierarchal order devised by a handful at the 'centre'.

The second story, "The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur", renders effectively the plight of a population invisible to India's mainstream society. The reader gets an authentic chronicle of the lowest depths of society subjected to abysmal existence. The old woman in this story is Andi who is slowly loosing eyesight and thus lives in a fairytale where there is "…no starvation, no famine, no despotism…none of the unbearable suffering of the sharecropper, no disease, no decrepitude." (OW 75). But in reality the poverty was complete in Mohanpur which was a village of fishers and Tior-Kaot outcastes. Andi spends her day picking herbs, fruits, and snails to give to fishers and take her little share. When Durga asks her that why does she bothers herself inspite of four sons to take care of her, she says, "Belly's sake."(OW76). The poverty stricken village life is so bad that Andi feels, "I shut my eyes and see everything clear as clear. I open my eyes and its dark." (OW 76). She tries to catch fish and ends up catching a snake because she cannot see clearly. Ironically, "The entire thing now graduates into a new version of fairy tale. Andi says, astonished, I caught a fish and it became a snake?"(OW 78). Andi's youngest son tells her to go to the doctor at the health centre. She asks surprisingly, "Do they look at poor?"(OW 78). The situation at the hospital substantiates Andi's apprehension. "There is never any disinfectant, cotton wool or *bandage*. In an *emergency* the doctor boils his instruments and lights a hurricane lantern to operate."(OW 81). Surprisingly Andi's optimism is such that although the doctor who examines her was not an ophthalmologist still she, "Returned home, her tales of hospital are endless. How the doctor looked with a light, gave her medicine, How he gave hope."(OW 85). This is ironical because Mohanpur of the present times is as much a part of India- the independent nation, as the urban centres. The alienation of the rural areas to such a pathetic extent is heart rending.

The fairy tale is about the delusions of this old woman who thinks that the eye – drops make her better each day. The medicines make her stronger. She thinks so, and feels so. The poor woman's degenerating vision cannot be stopped in spite of the world's best treatment available because she does not have access to it. Those at the margins are in a state of utter neglect. "Naskar has land, Naskar has relatives. 'Ceiling' in landholding is a word made for rural Bengal. A state-run farce. The word 'ceiling' does not apply to people like Naskar. Naskar's land is everywhere. Others do the cropping. Although they farm the land, they're not sharecroppers. Naskar pays them according to his convenience each year. In money and rice."(OW85). When activists like Gobindo try to make the villagers realize the significance of their power to vote their response is a simple and stark truth: "Nothing will come of this, son, just small folk will get crushed…Our lot is not to be bettered. All around us people are getting their claims, their shares, and we'll just look on."(OW 88-89). The government that should look after the downtrodden, victimized, and impoverished is actually an "incorporeal entity…ever-absent in rural life."(OW 91). Andi's long and endless struggle to seek treatment for diminishing vision goes on. The efforts by Gobindo, too, go on but the results are a far cry. "Andi's eyes are heavy with sleep. She thinks nothing about the fate of her eyes…Everything is like fairy tale one by one! she mutters, amazed, and her face, in sleep within the depths of this fairy tale ravine, looks most fulfilled."(OW 105).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, translator, critic and scholar, is Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities Department, Columbia University. She is well known for her translations from French and Bengali into English. As translator of *Old Women* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says:

> In my way of reading there is here a solid critique of nationalism as an end in itself and a loving critique of how male-gendered nationalism can solve a young man's crisis;…. The realization that as time passes, for a woman, the ideology of love remains a memory but acknowledges defeat in the hands of hunger is an exquisite aporia in the first story; almost between species-life and species-being…a very strong critique of the failure of decolonization in the second story.. the extraordinary resourcefulness of this village community of women and the guileless courage and simplicity of Andi, …are again a responsible narrative that offers a critique no less powerful than a merely reasonable one…(Introduction, *Old Women*)

The story of these voiceless women is a revealing examination of society. It constructs a complete historical picture that so far had only the victor's image. Studies of such voices also establish that the oppressed are no longer inarticulate. This category of fiction raises a pertinent question about the validity of the centre in the absence of the marginal. The position of the perspective makes the 'margin' as 'centre' thereby elucidating the notion of the 'privileged'. Literature therefore becomes effective as a tool for examining social, cultural and political processes. One can understand the systems through which power operates grading the structure in a binary. The ironical position of the marginal as part of the whole but outside centre can be best studied if the attempt to reinterpret identities continues by assigning voice to the voiceless.

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