

Introspecting The Life of Tribal Women in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and *The Hunt*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is a distinguished Indian writer and an esteemed activist who worked hard to uplift the tribal communities. She has a deep knowledge of the socio-political condition of India. She is an iconoclast who, in her works focussed on the miserable condition of depressed and neglected classes and tribes. Her different stories and novels shower light on the day to day happenings in the interiors of our nation. She has also talked about the quest for equal rights for each and every individual, especially for females in terms of education, health facilities, employment opportunities and social well-being. The present paper discusses “‘Rudali’ and ‘The Hunt’” in the light of atrocities done to the women in their tribes and the racist response given to them. Mahasweta Devi has portrayed the protagonists Sanichari and Mary Oraon, as the representatives of modern women searching for their own identity in the modern society. She presents the pitiable and pathetic condition of tribal women with their sorrows and sufferings and, more importantly, their infuriated inner self, which worked constructively to bring them to the level of mainstream individuals by injecting the sense of respect and appreciation for them.

Keywords: Distinguished, Upliftment, Tribal, Iconoclast, Quest, Individual, Atrocities, Representative, Identity.

Introduction

English is no longer Literature of fantasies and imagination. It presents the real-breathing humans with flesh and blood. An individual's feelings, passions, emotions, and experiences play a vital role in making a society. The day-to-day happenings, an individual's struggle, the existence of humans, and the face of reality have become important considerations of modern-day English Literature. In the same capacity, experimental narrative structures are bringing up the concerning ethical and social issues that influenced the different regional literatures immensely. Today, Literature has become a criticism of the socio-cultural problems of class,

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Received 05 Nov. 2023; Accepted 16 Nov. 2023. Available online: 25 Nov. 2023.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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caste, community, religion, and language. We cannot cut Literature off from the happenings of society; that is why it is truly being called the mirror of society. In every society, right from the early stages till this time, women have become the victims of injustice, cruelty, and brutality. Literature witnesses these atrocities and records them in writing. For ages, India has been symbolized by its cultural continuity and the enriched Literature. The image of Indian civilization has been truly projected in its Literature. In India we find different value structures, ritual styles, and systems of beliefs depending on the different religions. It seems that casteism has also been deeply rooted in Indian society. India was the fountainhead of the art of storytelling. The great Indian writers who write profusely about Indian culture are Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan. They truthfully reflected their concern with the Indian cultural practices and the unashamed practice of casteism. Mulk Raj Anand in his *Untouchable*, *The Road*, *Coolie*, and other novels, has exposed Indian culture and some of its evil practices. In *The Road*, he wrote about social injustice and the dominant forms of casteism and superstitions in Indian society. He bitterly exposes all the evil in Indian society and seeks the promotion of Indian culture.

Gender inequality is the social issue since time immemorial, and it has remained unsolved till now. The portrayal of Dalit women in Literature with all its shades is a herculean task. Among various factors, illiteracy and poverty are the most dominating ones for the pitiable condition of Dalit women in India. They are the victims not only at their workplaces but even at their homes as they are always victimized by the dominant classes. In spite of hard work at home and in the farm or agricultural fields, they are vulnerable in the society. The recent activities in the society in which Dalit women, even of middle age, were brutally and allegedly exploited raise questions about the fundamental freedom of every individual in Indian society. It is heart-rending to see all around such heinous crimes taking place unhampered. Even the minors, the young ones, are accused of showing inhumane treatment towards females in the society. Women have been the victim of male domination and subjugation. The miseries get doubled when we talk about marginalized women. She is the worst sufferer in Indian society. The works of Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi, Anita Desai, and Indira Goswami voice the victory of women over prevailing distinctions based on gender.

Mahasweta Devi has noticed the ruthless and cruel misuse of the physical and mental energies of the poor and ignorant people on the feeble excuse of socio-cultural or religious beliefs and practices. Her specialization is on marginalized Dalit and Adivasi studies, and she considers their women on the verge of extreme exploitation. In her works, the marginalized peoples are

characterized and presented to be protestors against the oppressive British rule, Mahajanas, and upper classes. She has portrayed their struggles and sacrifices in her works. She has boldly presented the cruel and brutal ill-treatment given to the ignorant and simple people by the persons in power, especially those belonging to the high caste. Being a social activist, her stories helped her in spreading awareness among the people regarding their rights. In fact, these are the stories of the people living in rural India, especially the tribal communities of West Bengal. According to her, the ordinary people play a dominant role in forming history, and in this connection, ballads, legends, folklore, and myths become the medium to carry the feelings and expectations of people from one generation to another. She has portrayed the common characters that are exploited, crushed, and oppressed, yet they do not accept defeat. The human sufferings are truly pictured in her works. Passions, emotions, feelings, and mental condition of characters are realistically presented, which appeals to everyone. Her voice is raised against the discrimination present in Indian society, especially the worst sufferers are the tribal people of India. Her famous novel 'Aranyer Adhikar' (Rights to the Forest), published in 1977 explores the life of a freedom fighter named Birsa Munda. Thus, her works voice the struggle and sufferings of the tribal people. Her other works include Hajar Churashir Maa, the biography of Rani of Jhansi, Murti etc. She also raised a movement against the industrial policy in West Bengal. She supported the farmers and the oppressed ones through her service.

Mahasweta Devi was felicitated with several awards Ramon Magsaysay, Jnanpith Award Sahitya Academic Award, Padma Shri, and Padma Vibhushan. She is also credited with editing of a famous Bengali magazine named 'Bortika,' which was later turned into a platform for the tribal, laborers, rickshaw pullers, and for all those whose voice has always been unheard in society on account of their class, caste, gender, tribe. She utilized her skills to uplift the minorities in her writings. In her works, the protagonists come up with inner confidence and mental victory. She successfully portrays Rudali as a woman with strong beliefs and powers. It is a tale of the exploitation of a tribal woman who is considered inferior by the dominant class and caste. She represents the whole of their lot. She chooses to be Rudali by her own will. No amount of physical factor distracts her from her internal strength and makes her shed tears. Her unflinching belief in her eternal powers made her stand upright even when she was surrounded by unfavorable circumstances.

Mahasweta Devi's works show that how in the name of religion or casteism, the poor are exploited. In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, a postcolonial theorist and professor at Columbia University, Mahasweta Devi told that the mainstream and the tribal are

always at parallel. They both can't understand each other. The former always exploit the latter. The mainstream deprived the tribals of education, health facility, and employment opportunities. They are always biased in their decision, and so she started writing about the tribal people and their struggle. Gayatri spivak Chakaraborty pointed out in the introduction of the translation of Mahasweta Devi's Breast stories that these stories voice the exploitative system of society. Partha Debnath examines Mahasweta Devi's depiction of Indian women as third-world women. According to him, the struggle of women and their call for liberation symbolize their strength as they have now started recognizing their powers and strength. Now, they want equal status as is given to the men in the society. The author describes the female protagonists of Mahasweta Devi to show their journey of exploitation.

Discussion

Mahasweta Devi has primary concern for the Tribal. She is a social worker who dedicated her life for the rights, empowerment, and improvement in the life of tribal communities. She has been known for the power of the pen and her determination. In her stories, she shows how women are subjugated and exploited by the authoritative and influential people of society. She portrays the struggle of women who are mistreated on account of their vulnerability. She truthfully witnessed their condition and sketched the picture of suffering humanity. In spite of all such portrayal she has never allowed her protagonist to be a victim of the situation rather each time, she successfully portrays a character who, with her inner power, comes with invincible energies and the essence of humanism. 'Rudali', 'The Hunt' etc. provide the example for the same.

Most of the time, the tribal is considered to be uncivilized and unsophisticated by our so-called modern society. The purity of the environment makes tribals live uncorrupted lives away from the ruthless invasion of modern civilization. They are far away from the city life. But, these marginalized people and their communities are intact and targeted by most of the benefit seekers. The search for identity is not a new journey by men on this earth. Different social, cultural, religious, and demographically segregated nations and groups search for the same. Members of ethnic, political, social, or religious groups stand to search for their own identity in society. Women, too, quest for this eternal identity, especially in their confined groups.

The story 'Rudali' narrates the struggle of the protagonist and the way she came out to be the symbol of women empowerment. It shows how she made herself shine out of her own problems, like a phoenix she resurrected from her ashes. The story takes us to a village, Tahad,

in Chhota Nagpur. Mahasweta Devi describes the tribal village as a place of extreme poverty and scarcity where human beings are biasedly treated due to the years of neglect, illiteracy, and lack of resources. Sanichari, the protagonist, was born on sanichar (Saturday), which is considered as an ill omen. So, an ill-fated Sanichari, was blamed by the villagers for everything bad that happens around her. The tale narrates her pitiable state as beginning with her father's death to the running off of her mother to join a folk theatre troupe. Her marriage to a drunkard and poverty-stricken Ganju, further enhanced her sorrows and disappointment. The untimely death of her mother-in-law made her speechless, though she was relieved that now no one could blame her uselessly on petty occasions. Sanichari didn't cry on anyone's death. Her sister-in-law and brother-in-law also died. Three deaths in three years made their unreleased tears turn into heavy stones. Overburdened with work, they have no time to express sorrow and pain. The yearning heart of Sanichari wondered as now there were fewer people to feed with her meager share.

The untimely death of her husband left her bereft however, she did not ever think that she would remain dry even after the death of her husband. Her only son Budhua was six years old at that time. Sanichari, like a fighter took all the challenges and accepted the responsibility of her family on her own shoulders. She worked frantically, taking up most of the petty jobs like cutting grass and wood. She also worked for wages. Anyhow, she made a small hut. In fact, the area was inherited by Sanichari with the untimely death of her brother-in-law and husband. Now, her only support was her son Budhua. The difficulties and hardships of life made Sanichari dejected and broken, but all through her life, she never shed a single tear. Although she was harshly and rudely blamed for the entire miss happenings and misfortune but, she never spoke a word. Once Budhua fell ill, she could not imagine her life without Budhua. She tried her level best to save him; she even went to Vaidya and begged for stronger medicine, but all her efforts went in vain. Even this time she did not burst into tears. For her mourning became a luxury as she has no time for it. With each death she was burdened with the arrangements of the last rites of the bodies, which were a difficult task for her. She was trapped in the illogical practices. These customs become the biggest obstacles for Ganjus. The economic and social conditions of the society are also depicted critically with the contrast of religious beliefs. According to them, another cultural practice of not keeping the corpse overnight in the home also stands as a burden on the protagonist. Sanichari had to pay the cost of repentance to the village authorities if she did not bury the body overnight. The cultural traps tortured the innocents.

After the death of her son Budhua, she found that his better half had left, and Haroa, the baby was alone in the home. She didn't have any resource to feed him. Some women rescued her. And in this way she saved Haroa. Later, she came to know that Bhudua's wife had become a prostitute. In fact, that was a necessity on the part of some women as otherwise it is impossible for them to feed themselves. Now, Sanichari was totally engrossed in the upbringing of her grandson. She was working very hard in the Landlord's fields. The sufferings and the problems of these people cannot be explained in words. At each juncture of the life they find themselves encircled in innumerable problems that seem to have no solution. When Haroa reached teenagehood, his grandma took him to Malik Mahajan. Landlords and money lenders used to beat the poor, innocent people and harassed them unlawfully. These wealthy people were destroying the very existence of the simple, illiterate people. They never let them live peacefully and contently. Their false pride and vanity is always safeguarded by them. Together, they all have imposed the baggage on the poor tribal people that they cannot put down. It seems that these simple people are carrying it from generation to generation without noticing even a bit of improvement in their social and economic status. Moreover, the continuous harassment by Malik Mahajans made them immune to the sufferings and atrocities done to them.

Haroa was a good boy but soon he started spending his time with the magicians, and one day Sanichari came to know that Haroa had left the village by accompanying the party of magicians. She always posed to be unconcerned for his departure, but from deep inside the heart she kept on looking for him from one place to another. Sanichari never expressed her sorrow in words or in tears and it seemed that she had realized it quiet earlier that sooner or later, even Haroa would leave her. One day, Sanichari met Bikhni, who had been her friend in childhood. She was equally the victim of exploitation and struggle. Her only son left her, took his wife, and stayed with his in-laws. She worked very hard for him but got shattered. Both the sufferers shared their agonies and tried to lighten themselves. They both started living in Sanichari small hut. Bikhni had only twenty rupees with her. Now, Sanichari started working in the field to earn some money. At the same time, Bikhni remained at the hut and completed the household chores. They lived like that for a while, Sanichari working as a field hand and bikini working at home. Soon, they ran short of money. It was on account of Dulan's advice that their mind got changed. He made them understand the ground reality that the landlords are indifferent towards the deaths that take place in their homes as they suddenly get grossed in the formal procession of making last rites of the dead ones, so they hire professional mourners to mourn on the dead of their dear ones. He further tried to convince them by saying that when someone

dies in our houses, our relatives cry, but for rich ones, it is a time to show their influence and prosperity. According to him, to arrange a spectacular funeral, landlords would definitely need rudalis to cry near the dead body. Thus, Dulan advised them to grease the vanity of landlords and make money out of it by working as a prestigious symbol of rudali at the death funeral and Kiriya of these wealthy landlords. Though in the beginning sanichari was outraged with the idea, but later she joined the magnificent profession wearing black borderless saree. Now, these two women did such a great job that they were paid five rupees each with additional food and clothing. After their first wailing at Bhairab singh's funeral they became famous, and hiring them to the funeral became a prestige issue among the landlords. She wholeheartedly and with full determination took up the new roles which coincidentally came into her life. The worst part of their lives was that they were, most of the time remained tied in the vicious circle of money lenders and sahu karas who never released them from their bonds of serving them for several years. Now, the oppressed were on the advantageous side; they started adding further dramatic features to their professional art and talent, as Sanichari suggested. Thus, they successfully made their business shine. It had been progressing with each new death in the house of affluent landlords. Giving rudali food and other things meant earning virtues. Now Dulan advised them to make a group of their own by adding whores to their profession. It would be beneficial for those whores also to perform the work of rudali.

Bikhni's nephew had informed her that her daughter's marriage was arranged and Bikhni son would surely come there. Bikhni told Sanichari that she would go to Ranchi for a few days to meet her son. Sanichari was alone in her own house as she missed her childhood friend the very air of her home seemed unfriendly. She lost her ease and comfort without the company of her friend. But the sudden news of her friend's untimely death due to asthma broke her entirely. She could not make out whether she was full of sorrow or full of fear. She was unable to express her feelings for her crying without monetary gains, and other articles is an idiotic. So she worked on the advice of Dulan, who told her not to let her talent go waste.

Now, Sanichari took the role of leader and reassured the qualitative improvement in the lives of whores. She in black saree went to Tohri looking for prostitutes and called them by their names which she learned from Bikhni. She explained that Bikhni had died and now they would work with her. Taking her own daughter in law, Gulbadan along with others, she confidently moved ahead for making the future of their lot. There was an aura of excitement around her. Young whores followed her footsteps. She trained them and made them stand their own. She

went to Gambhir Singh's funeral and performed her professional duty with other rudalis skillfully. Soon the chorus joined the lead voice of Sanichari.

The Hunt was published in an anthology entitled *Imaginary Maps* (1995) which is translated in English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 'The Hunt' is the story of the subjugation of tribal woman and her battle for the quest of the protagonist for her identity. The story is fictional, but the occurrences of such incidences are true and identical in the modern society. Radha Chakravarty appreciates Mahasweta Devi for being a champion of tribal cause. The story "Hunt" centres the annual hunting festival, which is the most popular festival of the tribals in Bihar. They celebrate it with great fervour and zest. The story begins with the peaceful tribal life in the village Kuruda. The story shows how Mary Oraon refuses to be a victim of exploitation and sets example by taking her revenge. Mary's mother Bikhani worked under an Australian planter, Dixon. She used to look after his bungalow. The colonial masters had always been cruel to the innocent and ignorants. They left no room to exploit them and the same thing happen when Dixon's son came to this place who sold their bungalow. He exploited Bikhani mentally and, assaulted her physically, and left her with her fate. Bikhani's daughter Mary Oraon does not look like a tribal. Her Australian father made her looks alien in her own surroundings.

Mary Oraon was harassed and stalked by a contractor named Tehsildar Singh. Mary resisted his advances, and in an act of self-defense, she murdered him. From the very beginning, Mary is portrayed as a woman with strong abilities. She was an astute businesswoman. She had countless admirers at Tahri market. She got down at the station like a queen and sat at her own rightful place. She is portrayed as an embodiment of strength, intelligence, generosity and reverence. She has a formidable personality, and she rebuked Tehsildar for his advances. When her verbal threats fell flat on him, she hatched a plan. She set up a rendezvous with Tehsildar in the forest during the annual fest. Tribal people believed that in every twelve years, they have to reverse the roles of gender. It was their belief, and they practice it blindly. During this festive time the men wore jesters' dresses, and women took the roles of males, especially hunters. The men also drink and sing. This year is the twelfth year. Mary would become a hunter in the year's ritual hunt. She intentionally met Tehsildar to take her revenge. She proceeded to attack him with her weapon machete. Thus, the story is a narrative of a woman who is a victim of male sexual aggression and takes her revenge by killing her oppressor. She inspires women to take charge of their lives and not surrender to this stereotypical image of a damsel in distress.

‘The Hunt’ is a story that brings to light how mainstream figures take advantage of the suppressed classes. The protagonist emerges as a survivor and not as a victim who fights all the odds and emerges as a strong and independent woman. Her quest for identity finally comes to a fruitful end. Author has inspired women to take charge of their own lives and act reasonably. Women with the power of their inner self can transform the hurdles and obstacles into opportunities and advantages. The protagonists in ‘Rudali’ and ‘The Hunt’ are examples for the same. They make out of nothing and change the driving force the other way around. Mahasweta Devi’s narratives describe the immoral behavior of the rich class and corrupt authorities towards the tribal communities. Her works state the physical, mental and emotional traumas that women experience in their daily lives. As Mahasweta Devi writes in the introduction of ‘Bitter Soil’, a collection of her short stories that her stories are a commentary on reality, and so people should feel ashamed for the miserable condition of the tribal people.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi shares the experiences of the marginalized communities in her works. She documented the suffering of the lower cast people in India and presented them faithfully to the world. The story ‘Rudali’ traces the transformation of Sanichari from a simple individual to a professional mourner. The story narrates the oppression and exploitation that women belonging to a low caste face in their lives. It shows that they are exploited not only physically, economically or religiously, but they are exploited to the extent that they start hating their own existence in the world. Their very soul or liveliness is thrashed by the so-called taboos of the orthodox ridden society. Her works blatantly criticize the evil practices even in the name of the religion, as in ‘Rudali’ when the protagonist was demanded with the cost of a rupee and a quarter to carry out ritual offerings; it explores the heights of exploitation. It seems that in the name of god and religious practices, the upper caste people did not hesitate to swallow her hard-earned meager money. It appears that only human nature intends to exploit the weaker, and it hardly has anything to do with religion. It’s only sometimes in the name of it and sometimes in the name of socio-political circumstances that she was exploited without giving any relief to her existence. Sanichari always hoped for a better life, but her hopes are mercilessly crushed each time under the prevalent circumstances. Her character portrays how she turned out to be a fighter from a weak woman. The end of the story shows her empowerment as a woman. In the end, she successfully trapped the oppressor in their own hypocrisy. She made her shortcoming of not shedding tears on her own grief into her strength by becoming a professional mourner.

In fact, Sanichari and Mary Oraon can easily be found in the villages of India rather there can be more than one in a village. Their stories narrate the state of two individuals in two different stages of their lives. In the first half, they were victims who were going through the deteriorating personal misfortunes; in the second half, they became acclaimed personalities. Thus, Mahasweta Devi successfully broke the stereotypical images of tribal women and raised them on a pedestal where their practices are recognized and honored. She depicted their lives in her writings and tried to change their living conditions. She believed that mere sympathizing with the poor did not help them. Some concrete steps should be taken by the bureaucrats, government, and the common people to redress the different modes of their exploitation. The collective efforts will definitely bring some fruitful improvements in their pathetic condition. Sudha Pai in her book *Dalits in the New Millennium*, states that in this new era, Brutality to them is different, and their responses are also different. The author raised the question why these atrocities still happen to them. According to her, the structural bias in the society leads to injustice towards Dalit.

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