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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TALE OF THE DISPOSSESSED-MAHASWETA DEVI'S *LITTLE ONES*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is one of those writers who have been writing for the tribal and dispossessed. She is one of the few writers who have an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdog. Devi is a socially conscious writer, who writes about the most marginalized section of the society. The present research paper is an attempt to expose the hypocrisy of the so called civilized people who have grabbed all the resources and opportunities and have disposed off a large section of society and have forced them in the state of abject poverty and deprivation. These cream of society have been thriving at the cost of these dispossessed people who have in fact become their prey. Her short story, *Little Ones* or 'Shishu' in Hindi is a hair-raising tale of starvation where people become reduced in size to pygmies due to hunger and malnutrition over years. Mahasweta Devi describes the tribal village, where these people live as a place of extreme poverty and scarcity. Here human beings are dehumanized due to years of neglect and paucity of resources. Their bodies never developed, they were born and brought up in starvation. They have seen rice – but only in dreams. Starvation has been the sole meaning of their existence in postcolonial India. Violence in turn is suggested the only way out. Devi's stories take us to the roots of the problem of complete ignorance on the part of the civilized which makes the situation deeply ironic. This is also the cause of Devi's anger towards the so-called ideas of progress. She believes that the root cause of these ills lie in the inability of the tribal mind to break free from primitive myths. In other words any move to bring these people into the mainstream will have to function within the paradigms of tribal narratives. She yearns for the demolition of the present state of affairs.

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INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi is one of those writers who have been writing for the tribal and dispossessed. She is one of those writers, in India, who have an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdog. Her powerful stories about the dispossessed along with her activism, on their behalf, have made her one of the best-known, and most frequently translated, of India's authors. Devi is a socially conscious writer, who writes about the most marginalized section of the society. Her trenchant, powerful, satiric fiction has won her recognition in the form of 'Sahitya Academy' and 'Jnanpith Award', the highest literary prize in India, in 1996. A social activist, she has spent many years crusading for the rights of the tribal and was also awarded the Padmasree and the Magsaysay, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, in 1997, for her activist work amongst dispossessed tribal communities.

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Her creative work – fiction and drama – has been characterized by a flair for authentic documentation of the spirit and passions of the time without any touch of sentimental romanticism. The present research paper is an attempt to expose the hypocrisy of the so called civilized people who have grabbed all the resources and opportunities and have disposed off a large section of society and have forced them in the state of abject poverty and deprivation. These cream of society have been thriving at the cost of these dispossessed people who have in fact become their prey. Mahasweta Devi is one of those rare writers who always aspire to find and explore something challenging and new, and never accept the existing ideals. Established as a leading novelist with the publication of *Aranyer Adhikar* 'The Rights over the Forest' in 1977, Devi has affected a new trend of writing in the Bengali language. The major part of her creative writing is characterized by an unwavering dedication and ardour for the underdog. Born into a well known artistic family in January 1926 in Dhaka, then in British India, Mahasweta Devi writes in Bengali. She was born and brought up in a literary ambience, as both of her parents were national intellectuals and litterateur of standing. Her

father Manish Ghatak was a poet as well as novelist, and her mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer and social worker. She is a very prolific writer. Exposing exploitation and domination in the post colonial state, Devi's writings are different from the literature of diasporic nostalgia for the place left behind. Her literary masterpieces, among others, include *Jhansir Rane* (1956), *Hazaar Chaurasir Ma* (1975) (translated into English as *Mother of 1084*, and later made into a movie), *Rudali* (1997) (adapted in a play as well as into a movie), *Agni Garbha* (1978), and *Chatti Munda O Tir* (1980), *Aranayer Adhikaar* (1977), and stories like *Draupadi, Breast Giver, Dolouti the Bountiful, Shri Shri Ganesh Mahima* etc.

Being a writer with a social cause, her stories are a caustic comment on India as a nation and the socio-political trajectory of the country which has happened since independence. She writes about the lives of ordinary men and women, particular about subaltern consciousness. Her stories, including *Draupadi*, and specially her *Palamau Stories* give voice to tribal – Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas and the junction of folk and the modern, the mainstream and the margin, colonialism and post-colonialism. Her stories are deeply rooted in her own experiences with the people about whom she writes. Her fiction is neither fantasy nor pastoral romance. It is firmly rooted in earth, in ground reality, in the solidity of facts. Detailed documentation goes into making of the narrative. In her elaborate Bengali fiction she often depicts the brutal oppression of the tribal people and untouchables by potent authoritarian upper caste landlords, lenders and venal government officials. As Samik Bandyopadhyay in Introduction to *Five Plays* points out that "Her plays and stories are often located in communities of the fringe, outside the dominant upper caste milieu" (viii). Her main concern is to expose the stranglehold of feudalism over land and poor people. So she has, "not coloured a single sequence or presented a single falsehood" (quoted in Bandopadhyay viii). She has just documented how people live under that oppression. Her sympathetic portrayal aims to capture the pain and torment in the life of the oppressed people. In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, she tells:

The tribal and the mainstream have always been parallel. . . . The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel...
They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities . . . they are denied everything. . . .
That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal world. . . .

I repay them their honour. (Spivak, *Breast Stories* 265). Her primary endeavour is to break the stereotype images about the tribal and to know their practices as well as recognize and honour them. Irked by the gross indifference of the contemporary writers towards this suffering humanity, she takes up cudgels against the establishment. She justifies violence where the system fails to do justice. To understand and write about the oppressed life, a creative writer, as she says, "should have a social conscience . . . a duty towards society" ("Remembering the Limits" 265). And it is unpardonable on the part of the writer who puts on the Nero like attitude as the people of his country are punished for no fault of theirs. It is no wonder that in all her stories runs a single thread a profound concern for the human predicament and sincere hope for the better future of mankind. Thus, taking every aspect of human suffering to the heart, she focuses on the social evils and tries to find out solutions to the problems. Mahasweta Devi's commitment to the cause of tribal and the dispossessed is most evocatively expressed in her short stories. Profound humanism imbued with a deep-rooted love for the suffering humanity lies at the core of Mahasweta's philosophy of life. For those of us who believe that writing should serve social purpose, she is like bacon in an era where the catch phrase appears to be: "Every man for himself and may the devil take the hindmost" (Bhatnagar 41). She has been writing about the dispossessed people of India for fifty years. In all her writings, she tries to depict the lives of common men and women, particularly the Adivasi people like the Santhals, the Lodhas, the Shabars and the Mundas - the simple joys and sorrows of their lives, their exploitation and suffering, and condition of abject poverty in which they live and, in the process, they question mainstream history by presenting the "people's version of history" (Untapped Resources 15). She roams all over the country and spends days and months, mixing freely with these people. She not only depicts their lives in her writings but also tries to change the conditions of their lives through various social welfare activities – it is here that her uniqueness as a creative thinker lies. Having worked amongst the tribal for the greater part of her life, she is in a position to articulate the concerns of the dispossessed in the manner of the concerned insider, rather than that of a condescending outsider.

Devi, a writer with a social purpose, stands in support of the Adivasis and women who are deprived of the benefits of the professed development. Her tireless crusade for the cause of the tribals and the dispossessed was saluted by the Megasaysay Award for her compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal people a just and honourable place in India's national life. The plight of this tribal and nomadic population is worrisome as they still do not have the right to vote. In one of the most heinous subversion of human rights, the population is kept on the move and is shuffled from one police register to another in a guise of system and organization. The main purpose of her writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies. "I believe in documentation", she writes in her introduction to *Bitter Soil*, a collection of her short stories, "After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India." Her writings are based on fact but not fiction. She further adds that: "I have not written these stories to please my readers. If they get under the skin of these stories and feel as the writer feels that will be reward enough" (*Bitter Soil* x). Most of the stories in *Bitter Soil* can be interpreted at a symbolic level. *Little Ones* deals with tribal who were unable to grow up on account of the overbearing presence of the Big Brothers. In a sense, the story describes an inversion of civilized norms by the very people who are supposed to sustain them. Violence in turn is suggested the only way out. Evidently this is writing with a mission, a sense of commitment, with the clear cut objective of examining the myths of progress in terms of those excluded from the mainstream realms of discourse. The stories are well crafted, using the experience of tribal life as a creative raw material, though it is her own location which shapes the

narrative. Her stories take us to the roots of the problem of complete ignorance on the part of the civilized which makes the situation deeply ironic. This is also the cause of Devi's anger towards the so-called ideas of progress. She believes that the root cause of these ills lie in the inability of the tribal mind to break free from primitive myths. In other words any move to bring these people into the mainstream will have to function within the paradigms of tribal narratives. The reason, the protagonist of *Little Ones* fails, is precisely he refuses to accept that his discourse is unintelligible to the starving tribal for whom he ostensibly brings relief supplies. Mahasweta depicts his traumatic encounter with a group of tribal who appear to be small kids. But actually they were adults, reduced to the size of emaciated children on account of malnutrition. Their bodies never developed, they were born and brought up in starvation. They have seen rice – but only in dreams. Starvation has been the sole meaning of their existence in postcolonial India. Malnutrition as a cause of stunted growth in the case of pygmies, writes the author, has been affirmed by anthropologists. In the story, *Little Ones,* she exposes such a system that keeps the tribal locked in the age old cycle of poverty, hunger and disease. *Little Ones* or 'Shishu' in Hindi is a hair-raising tale of starvation where people become reduced in size to pygmies due to hunger and malnutrition over years. As Devi herself says:

Starvation over generations can reduce ordinary sized human beings to pygmies. Of course, the starving Aagariyas are savagely angry at a system under which some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve! For I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions. (ix)

The story takes us to Lohri, a village, which is situated at the meeting point of the boundaries of three districts - Ranchi, Sarguja and Palamau. The village is painted as a terrible place, where people lack even the basic resources to start living. It presents the vicious cycle of hunger, neglect, poverty and hunger. It is also a tale where the world of city and village meets. But Mahasweta Devi describes this tribal village as a place of extreme poverty and scarcity where human beings are dehumanized due to years of neglect and paucity of resources:
Lohri is a terrible place. Even if you give those damned people land, they sell it off to the *mahajans*. They stare at you wide eyed and ask, where's the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm? Even if you give them all this, they'll still sell to the *mahajan*, saying, what were we to eat until the harvest? So we borrowed money. Now, we've sold the land to repay the debt. (3) In this tale of poverty and hunger, the relief officer, who has been appointed by the Food Department, is stunned to see the distance between the romanticized image he had, of the way the tribal lived, and the stark reality which he faces. He has the impression that singing plays a big role in the lives of the adivasis. Now, he hears their songs for himself:

Continuous, like the lonely wailing of an old witch. An extremely frustrating experience. The *relief officer* had formed a few ideas about adivasi life from films, especially Hindi films. If these are their songs, then how do they mourn their dead? These songs are like dirges. Unsettling! Unsettling! (2)
He had formed a few ideas from the adivasi movies that singing is a part and parcel of the happy lives of adivasis. Now facing the stark reality, he comes to know the actual secret of singing of these tribal: "Those who can't walk, those who are too old, will sit in a circle and sing like that. They will sing and sing till they die. When the singing starts in one village, the dying old women from the other villages send the youngsters off to collect relief and start keening, themselves" *(*10). He is shocked to see, how these tribal live in sub-human conditions. In a very natural reaction, he is repulsed at their grotesque appearance and unnatural existence: "Never in his life has he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place. The sight of those who come for relief, the near naked, shriveled, worm ridden, swollen bellied adivasi men and women, repels him" (2).

This story is compressed into a couple of short sentences without any subordinating clauses and in a rapid picture like sequence of events as in the oral tradition, is interrupted several times by contemporary voices each having a characteristic diction and a certain level of skepticism. Devi, deals with the themes of hunger, starvation and malnutrition. The theme of starvation is introduced as a mystery. It comes out in a tale narrated to the relief officer that whenever relief is sent to this village, it gets stolen. One reason behind this activity of stealing is that the people here are not honest and the basis of this dishonesty is that the soil of this village is infertile: "Nothing grows there. Nothing grew. Not paddy, not *jawar*, not *maroa*, not *bhutta*" (7). And further, the harsh words reinforce the hardness and the cursed character of the land: "Strike the earth with a plough, and it's as if you hit iron beneath the surface. A cursed land" (7). That is why the villagers indulge in the act of stealing. It is this hunger and poverty which forces the inhabitants of Lohri to steal the relief material which is for them only. This whole process of stealing of relief material is going on for so many years and the culprit is still a secret for the authorities as well as for the villagers. Anyone who dares to catch the culprit gets crazy. Now the villagers start believing that there is some supernatural power that turns everyone crazy whosoever tries to come in the way of tribal stealing grain. The jeep driver thus explains to the relief officer:

I don't know what it is about Lohri, but it fills the heart with fear. We will drink a little *daru-uru* at night. Close to the camp. Otherwise it gets scary. That Bahadur even went crazy . . . those who were with him say, they were all asleep that night. Bahadur suddenly took off, yelling thief-thief! And then disappeared into the dark. Those who went to look for him heard someone laugh in the darkness, got scared and came back. Next morning they saw bahadur lying senseless. He revived but didn't return to his senses. (12)

But reality is something else. The real culprit is the village *Tehsildar*. He is a cunning man who: "every year steals from the *relief* and consolidates his own affairs. He's extremely corrupt but very efficient. He appoints ten Agariya youths to clean and look after the camp" (13). Irony lies in the fact that everyone in the village thinks him to be one of the helping

hands in the noble cause of relief and no one can even think of suspecting him. But this year the relief camp is well managed by the new relief officer. He has put his heart and soul in the relief work and takes utmost care that everyone gets his share from the relief camp. The relief officer gets completely involved in this relief work: "The scorched earth - like appearance of the area, its stunted, dusty and leafless jungles, its reddish cruel hills, all seem to lose their harshness. The hungry, starving people become *top priority*" (14). People begin to come from afar. They start calling him a *Deota* - 'God'. To hear the word *deota* from the mouths of those who do not trust anyone but themselves is a victory indeed. In a few days, even the *tehsildar*, who pretends to be happy with what is going on, says: "*Hujoor* you have restored faith in the hearts of these animals, the way you have been working" (14). The relief officer was told about the previous stealing of the sacks of grain, which happened every year in the relief camp. He was told that the previous relief officer woke up one night and saw tiny, pigmy – like people running away with sacks of grain: "I got up, and saw tiny little people - kids, probably – running away with the sacks" (7-8). The history repeats itself as the new relief officer wakes up in the middle of the night to find the same pygmies stealing sacks of grain. He runs after them, warding to catch them: "The relief officer begins to drown in a bottomless ocean. In Ranchi, amidst sparkling lights, taxis and cars, life continues. And where is he headed? To a land where supernatural children offer ghostly smiles in reply to gunshots, as they run away with relief goods" (10-11). He follows them in a determined effort to retrieve the stolen sacks of grain:

Stubbornly, he continues to run. They also run. The forest thins out. Dry straw like grass jungles. Fallow land. This is the place where the sun and Jwalamukhi fought. Reaching there, the youths put down the sacks of rice and *milo*. *(*17)

As the story reaches its climax, the world of 'civilized' man and the world of the 'dehumanized' meet. The whole scene displays Mahasweta Devi's consummate skill in depicting the horror and the sheer inability of the relief officer in facing up to what he sees before his eyes:

Fear, terrible fear. Terrible, terrible fear. He feels a terrible fear. Why are they advancing in silence? Why don't they speak? Their bodies are now clearly visible. What's this? Why are they naked? Why is their hair so long? If they are young, young boys, adolescents, then why is their hair white? Why do the girls, the little girls, have empty, sagging breasts? Why is he coming forward? The one with grey hair. (18)

His mind grapples with the horror of the situation, he is still not able to accept that such wanton neglect and atrocious realities exist in this world of Copernicus, science and five year plans: "Because if this is true, then all else is false. The universe according to Copernicus, science, this century, this freedom, plan after plan. So the relief officer reiterates – '*Na! Na! Na!'" (*19).

In the end, the narrator's voice becomes one with the voice of the malnourished Aagariyas: "Just saying Na won't change things. How else did we get these? Can't you tell that we're not kids? They cackle in ghoulish, vengeful glee. Then they circle him, laughing. (19-20) The relief officer stands mute, unable to come to terms with the sees as the 'heinous crime' of civilization:

He can't say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. (20)

Showing both, testimony of her commitment to the cause of the starving tribal as well as her thorough grasp of the political and social dimensions of the problem, Mahashweta Devi says: There are about two and a half crores [25 million] of such people who still live in bondage. Because 1871 Criminal Tribes Notification Act was repealed, but Government of India re-introduced a Habitual Offenders Act in 1959 for every state, which is nothing but a repetition of that British myth, Criminal Tribes Act. So, what happened before-that continues. ("On Tribal Welfare")

In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicts the brutal oppression of the tribal people and untouchables by potent authoritarian upper caste landlords, money lenders and venal government officials. She believes that mere sympathizing with the poor doesn't help them; she lives with them in order to bring their grievances and demands to the view of a generally indifferent bureaucracy and sets off movements for the redress of different modes of exploitation. So the subjects of her stories become the subjects of her life. In fact, the main thrust in the bulk of her creative work is the release of human soul from all kinds of oppression.

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