



## REVIEW ARTICLE

### INTERPLAY OF ART AND ACTIVISM IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S SEEDS

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#### ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is one of the few authors who have an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdog. She has been writing about the dispossessed people of India for fifty years. 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. The present paper analyses the connection between the works of Mahasweta Devi and her social work. In fact most of her writings are an outcome of her activism. *Seeds*, one of her short stories, can be interpreted as a story of rebellion; the seeds which are sown in the form of corpses. In a sense, this 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. In this story, the landlord manipulates the political machinery, even getting away with murder, until Dulan Ganju, a poor peasant and the protagonist retaliates at the end by smashing his head with stone. After the killing, Dulan buries the headman under a pile of stones, which is an exact reversal of what the headman got Dulan to do, to the victims of his oppression. This is the natural outcome of years of silence, which should not be equated with acceptance and condoning of suppression of rights. Though Devi does not glorify violence, yet she is deeply aware of the way the mind of an oppressed works. The human spirit has its limitations to bear oppression and victimization and the consequence violence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi 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. 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. 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. Devi is one of those rare writers who always aspire to find and explore something challenging and new, and never accept the existing ideals. 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. 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 works 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 and novels are deeply rooted in her own experiences with the people about whom she writes and that is the mixture of her activism with

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her art. She recalls the time spent with her subjects' 'preparation' for writing. From 1963 to 1975, she went to Singhbhum, Ranchi, Palamau and Chaibasa areas of Jharkhand every year to spend time with the tribal people, who lived lives of extreme deprivation as bonded labourers and nomadic groups. They had no right to education or access to health facilities and were living off the meager resources of steadily shrinking forests. Mahasweta Devi soon became involved in a movement to better their conditions. One means that she had used with great effectiveness for the betterment of these people has been her creative work. Since Mahasweta is a compulsive activist, and writing comes to her as an instrument in her battle against exploitation, her works take in unconventional configurations. Activism has its bearing on her style, particularly which has hitherto been the sole preserve of the ruling elite. At the level of social consciousness, she is up against the male capitalistic brahmanical order; at the level of aesthetics, she overturns the established notions of narration. Her aesthetics is deeply implicated in activism; rather it is her activism that becomes the defining principle of her aesthetics. 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. Her stories are deeply rooted in her own experiences with the people about whom she writes. 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. She does not take a tangential view of reality as well as authenticity of fiction is the first condition for its application for activist purpose.

Her acquaintance and involvement with so many different organizations bring her face to face with varied life styles and problems of different communities. Her experience is clearly visualized in her writings. Her stories depict the life and situation of people living beyond the limits of the metropolis of Calcutta. 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).

As a writer with a social purpose, she stole the scene only after she was given the most coveted 'Sahitya Akademi' award for her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* in 1979 and equally prestigious title 'Padmasree' by the Indian government for her social work in the tribal areas of the three neighboring states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, especially in the districts of Medinipur, Purulia, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. Having been motivated by a sense of history, her writings hold a mirror to the present as well as the past. In fact, she was a witness to several people's movements before she became a writer. She writes about the everyday life and problems of tribal folk. However, she is not the first writer in contemporary Bengali literature to make tribal life as the subject of her writing. There is a long tradition of such writing as is evident from the work of famous writers such as Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, and Satinath Bhaduri. But there is a remarkable difference in their outlook and that of Mahasweta Devi. In her tribal work, life is not romanticized. 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).

Devi is an activist as well as a writer, and even as a writer she is an activist. She strongly believes that organized group action by the people left out of the 'development' process is the only way for them to get what is due to them as the citizens of this country. This belief has led her found several organizations and she is actively associated with several others. 'The Pachim Banga Munda Tribal Samaj Sudhar Ganthra', 'The Pachim Banga Bhumij Tribal Samajkalyan Samiti', 'The Pachim Banga Harijan Kalyan Samiti', 'The Palamau Zilla Bandhua Samiti' and the 'Behrampur Sweeper Association' are some of them. Her involvement with these groups, and the issues they face, are intense. As an activist she is dedicated to the struggles of the tribal people in Bihar, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Recently she is more famous for work related to the struggles of tribal people, Lodhas and Shabaras of West Bengal, women and Dalits. She has written with great depth and understanding about how women bear the brunt of poverty and discrimination, and how they have to rear children in the most difficult circumstances.

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 third story of her collection of short stories, *Bitter Soil* is named as *Seeds*, which is one of the hardest hitting statements on the exploitation of the peasants at the hands of the powerful. In *Seeds*, it is a local village headman, Lachhman Singh who is connected to the local politicians, and belongs to the dominant caste that controls and exploits the local resources. Through her short fiction Mahasweta Devi speaks for the working classes as an attempt to raise consciousness about the real India that still exists beneath the assertions of progress and justice. In fact she believes that her social activism is the driving force of all her literary activities. As she declares: It is not new for my literature to spring from a fight for the rights of these oppressed and downtrodden people. The tribal revolt against the British at the turn of the century formed the backbone of *Aranyer Adhikar*, which the Sahitya Akademi had singled out for their awards. My social activism is the driving force of all my literary activities, be it literature . . . which brought me into the good books of Jyanpeeth . . . Perhaps their stories also

impart a narrative immediacy to my language. ("Badge of all Their Tribes")

In this story, *Seeds*, she exposes the motivation behind voluntary land donation by the upper caste zamindars to the landless after independence. This was done in order to get rid of barren and useless land by the zamindars. But irony lies in the fact that in all these stories, the peasants are not unaware of these strategies adopted by the landlords:

There is a proverb which says that what you pick up free is worth fourteen annas. The land, free but there was not even fourteen paisa profit from it. The land belongs to above mentioned Lachhman Singh. Quite years ago, Sarvodaya activists go from door to door to every landlord in this area . . . This gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be got rid of. The recipients are bought over. One's position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all, like a rossogolla after a meal, there is the added satisfaction of knowing one is compassionate. (Bitter Soil 25) The protagonist of the story, Dulan, is very much aware of these strategies. But he has to survive. He starts making plans how to make a profit from his barren and infertile land. Soon he comes to know that the government has started a scheme in which it will bear all the expenses of farming, seeds etc. Here the writer displays her consummate understanding of the alternate strategies that have been adopted by Dulan and his kind: "But the drive for survival prompts him to exploit situations by using his natural guile rather than force. He fools his powerful adversaries not by strength, but by wit and cunningness, and all the stratagems of survival are at his fingertips" (28). As soon as he got the land he thanked Lachhman Singh for giving him 'such a fertile piece of land' but at the same time he shows his helplessness to farm it:

Ahaha such a good piece of land! I have got it but I can't use it.

-Why? The BD office will give you everything. I'm a low caste.'

-of course you are. It's because you don't remember this that you get kicked around. Sure you're a low caste! But how can they refuse to help someone I'm giving land to? (28 - 29) On his request Lachhman Singh writes a strong appeal to BDO advocating that Dulan should get money in installments to buy plough and bullocks, seeds and fertilizers. As a result Dulan gets help from government. Dulan further uses his strategy to extract money from the government displaying that plough and bullock: "Every alternate year. Every time he takes the money, he says, the bullock died, hujoor.' He takes the money, collects the fertilizer and sells it at Tohri. hoists the sack of seeds onto his shoulder and brings it home" (29-30). Reaching home, he decides to eat those seeds after boiling them and make it rice.

The story follows a very simple pattern of narrative interspersed with a voice commenting on the sequence of events. This comment is usually presented in dialogue form which serves as an articulation of the resentment seething in the minds of those whose rights like food, clothing and shelter have been snatched. When his wife queries about these things, he responds:

Our hunger. Can hunger be measured? The Land of one's stomach keeps increasing! You want me to farm that barren strip of land? Are you crazy?

-What'll you do, then?

-Boil it, grind it, we'll eat it. (30)

It takes Dulan's wife only one meal made from the seeds to realize that she had never eaten anything so sweet in her life: "She proudly told everyone in the village about this tasty food. Can other married woman in the village boast of how brainy her man is, of how cunningly he fools the gorment, so that his family can eat rice made from paddy seeds?" (30). Author does not romanticize poverty or protest. She knows that the structures of power are firmly entrenched in the minds of people, especially of those who are used to it since centuries. Another issue raised in the story is of the daily wages of the labourers which were not as per the then present conditions. The villagers demand a raise of twenty five paise in their daily wages as the labourers of the neighboring villages are given eight annas a day, but they are forced to work in the fields of Lachhman Singh for four annas a day. They too, are deeply aware of the uphill struggle, and yet know that a battle can be fought on many fronts and in many ways: "The gorment belongs to Lachhman Singh. . . If such a gorment is fleeced by someone who happens to be a Dulan Ganju, then the villagers are bound to be full of appreciation" (30). One day Karan Dushad of Tamadih arrived in the village, who used to work as a labourer in Lachhman's field. But he indulged in a dispute with Lachhman and was sent to jail. The following passage from the story shows the birth of a realization that instead of waiting for justice, they villagers have to at least try to get decent wages as fixed by the government:

The Karan who had rebelled only when Lachhman Singh had driven him to the end of his tether, came out of jail and said to everyone- conditions are unchanged. Why wait till he forces us to resist, get shot at, get jailed? Let's organize ourselves in advance. Talk things over with him. Ask the police to be present during harvesting. Our demands are very few. We're harijans and adivasis. We won't get good wages in these parts. We'll fight for eight annas. Women-men-children, eight annas for everyone. He's giving four annas. This will be our 'twenty-five paise battle' for an additional four annas. (32) But at the same time, the tribal are fully aware of the balance of power that tilts in the favour of the rich and the powerful: "Make no mistake. The entire sarkar will help Lachhman. He can open fire and they won't notice. But you raise a stick and they'll catch you". (33) The harvesting and gathering of the corn went off peacefully. Each worker gets eight annas as daily wages and it is all because of Karan Dushad: "Karan Dushad became a hero. A fairy tale comes true" (33). But this peace is not at all acceptable to Lachhman Singh. He has already conceived a plan to let things according to him: As evening draws to dusk, in the radiance of the setting sun, Lachhman Singh accompanied by his Rajput caste brothers, attacks the Dushad quarters in Tamadih. Fire rages, people burn, huts collapse. (33) Dulan is forced to bury Karan and his brother Bulaki, in his field. He is told to guard the land. This is the reason why Dulan always sleeps on the machaan in the middle of the field, though nothing grows in the land. Lachhman is very well

aware that no one in the village will raise a voice against him. Those who have seen all this will not say anything: "They have read the warning in Lachman's sharp, silent gaze. He who opens his mouth will die. This has happened before. Will happen again" (35).

Though Devi does not glorify violence, yet she is deeply aware of the way the mind of an oppressed works. The human spirit has its limitations to bear oppression and victimization and the consequence violence. The following comment of the narrator echoes the sentiments felt by Dulan, Dhatua, Latua and the countless dispossessed like them: Once in a while it is necessary to rend the sky with leaping flames and the screams of the dying, just to remind the harijans and untouchables that government laws, appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing. Rajputs remain Rajputs, Brahmins remain Brahmins and Dushad-Chamar-Ganju-Dhobi remain lower than Brahmin – Kayasth – Rajput – Bhumihaar – Kurmi. The tribal too are deeply aware of the uphill struggle, and yet know that a battle can be fought on many fronts and in many ways. (35)

As the time passes everyone is forced to forget that two persons, Karan Dushad and Bulaki are missing from the village. The things get turned in such a manner which results in powering of Lachman Singh. Devi focuses on the awareness of the oppression and of victimization that all her protagonists develop during the course of the story. It is the realization that they are not safe, no matter where they go or where they hide, that makes them realize that hiding or denial will not work any longer. During the harvesting, the storm of exploitation breaks once again as Lachman Singh fires shots on the labourers working in the fields in which many labourers are killed: "Four horses carrying four corpses. This time Lachman's men help Dulan. Deep, deep pits are needed. The land is soaked with monsoon rain and autumn dew. Four corpses piled one on the other. The burden within Dulan grows even heavier" (42). But the tragedy is that Dulan will never be able to reveal this secret to anyone. On reaching home he listens to his son Dhatua's song in which he asks whereabouts of Karan Dushad and his peaceful brother Bulaki, Hearing the song Dulan gets disturbed and scared also as to what will happen to Dhatua if Lachman hears this song? He warns Dhatua: "Dulan broke into deep sobs. He said- forget that song. Or you'll also get lost in police files. . . . His heart is filled with unnamed fear for his son Dhatua. . . ." (43-44)

Dulan's fear proves true as one fine day when harvesting is going on Dhatua raises his voice against the low wages they are given. He leads the labourers and refuses to work in Lachman's fields. He says: No hujoor! We won't. Dhatua protests. Lachman sighs. Once again he will have to work to pattern. Once again he will have to pick up his gun. . . .

As the light fades into evening, Lachman gives his men the necessary actions- If threats do the trick, don't open fire. Lachman's men ride their horses through the ripe paddy. . . They raise their guns. This side storms into the fields at amazing speed. . . . First verbal missiles speed back and forth. Then the inevitable bullets fly. Lots of them. . . . Then the

sharp scythes and iron choppers slash the horses' hooves, keep slashing. The horses and their riders thunder on. . . . (46-48)

Dulan and his family wait and wait for Dhatua but he doesn't come. Next day, Lachman Singh himself tells him:

Sorry, Dulan, I forbade them, but still these beasts opened a fire. . . .

– Dhatua?

–Buried. . . .

Yes. But don't open your mouth, Dulan. Or else your wife, your son, son's wife, grandson, no one will be spared. Take, I'll give you money, lots of money. Your son called the police. . . . But remember I am sparing Latua only because he's your son. I haven't fired a single bullet today. I could have felled Dhatua with a single shot. But I didn't. (49-50) Dulan contemplates again and again, and finally he decides to go mad. He starts uprooting the aloe and putush from his land as he wants to sow seeds in his land. When Lachman comes to know of this he gets very angry and comes to Dulan in his field. At this point the story charts the pangs of seething anger which explodes one day in a form of extreme violence on part of Dulan. He kills the village headman Lachman Singh with a rock. The violence and the brutality of the killing amply illustrate the nature of sentiment of the tribal, which erupts in such acts when the oppression cannot be tolerated any further:

Dulan below, Lachman on horseback. All at once. Dulan grabbed Lachman's foot and pulled hard. Lachman fell. His gun was hurled away. The gun in Dulan's hand. Before Lachman could gather his wits, the butt of the gun slammed into his head. Lachman screamed. Dulan smashed the butt into his collar bone. . . .

He began to smash in Lachman's head with a rock . . . Dulan is not used to killing, a rock has no value, this death is the result of years of intense mental turmoil. He continued to smash Lachman's head in. (54) After the killing, Dulan buries the headman under a pile of stones, which is an exact reversal of what the headman got Dulan to do, to the victims of his oppression. This is the natural outcome of years of silence, which should not be equated with acceptance and condoning of suppression of rights: "Laughter begins to well up inside him. So, Malik protector, you're like the disgusting Oraon-Munda? Buried under stones? A stony grave?" (54) The search of Lachman continues for a few days. No one even suspects that Dulan can do such a thing: "At no stage do suspicions centered on Dulan. It is natural not to suspect him. It is impossible to imagine Dulan killing Lachman, whatever the circumstances" (55). In end, contented Dulan gives away his paddy to his fellow peasants in a poignant sharing of spirit, of something sacred, which was paid for by the sacrifice of youth of the village, and his sons:

–My paddy is your seed. Take it.

–You're giving it away?

–Yes, take it, reap it. There's a long story behind this-

–Did you use fertilizer?

–Yes I did, very precious fertilizer. Dulan's voice disappears like the string of a served kite losing itself in the sky. Then, clearing his throat he says – You harvest it. Give me some, as well. I'll sow it again and again.

There is in the ripe green paddy nourished on your flesh and bones! Because you will be seed. To be a seed is to stay alive. Dhatua - Dulan's voice trembles as he says the name. Dhatua, I've turned you all into seed. (56) Thus, the birth of a consciousness is established as part of a cycle of oppression, awareness and sacrifice. After a deep analysis of these stories, we find that profound humanism imbued with a deep-rooted love for the suffering of humanity lies at the core of her philosophy of life. In all her writings, she tries to depict the life of ordinary men and women, particularly of the Adivasi (tribal) people like the Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas, the simple joys and sorrows of their lives, their exploitation and sufferings and conditions of abject poverty in which they live. She roams all over the country and spends days and months, mixing freely with these people. She not only depicts their life in her writings but also tries to change the conditions of their life through various social welfare activities – it is here that her uniqueness as a creative thinker lies.

She is perfectly aware of the all pervasive nature of exploitation. She highlights the seriousness of the situation in one of her interviews when she asserts that the societal changes of the past decades have not changed anything for these people. This amply demonstrates the fact that for Mahasweta Devi literary and social activism is not based on any romantic notions. She has stayed and worked with the tribal and has been deeply involved in tracking changes pre and post policy making by the government and the bureaucrats. She, further, asserts that literature has to act as both, the watchdog and the conscience of a society, failing which the subaltern will continue to lose out on their rights in society, which shows how her literature is inseparable from her activism. She not only works for these people but also presents a realistic picture of their lives. Some have found her stories too contrived, too calculated to prove a point. But there can be no two opinions about the sincerity of her concern. Compassion and sympathy join hands with various literary devices like the use of myth

and sweeping historic imagination, resulting in an intensity which gives her work distinctness unmatched in contemporary Bangla fiction. Devi is very clear about the reason why she writes. That is to create a forum which can give the cause of the dispossessed a voice and a sense of being a part of the larger struggle for human rights and civil liberties. She is one of the rare litterateurs who think that art has a social responsibility because it rises out of and finds sustenance in the shared realm of culture and public spaces. 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. She has taken unusual themes from contemporary life and transformed them into works of artistic excellence. In fact, experience and factual details are the ground on which her stories are inscribed. Survival through struggle is the central message of her dramatic creation. Most of her short stories portray the life of the downtrodden and the neglected people of the country, destroyed by man's greed, narrowness and selfishness. Some of her writings will undoubtedly overcome the barriers of time and live in people's minds, for the years to come.

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