



Rendering Voice To The Voiceless: A Critical Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Plays

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Abstract

For sixty years, Mahasweta Devi has battled ceaselessly for the rights of oppressed women, primarily from the tribal areas. Her struggles to represent the subaltern are central to her narratives, whether plays or short stories or her activism in real life. She dealt extensively with women's and Dalit rights in her writings, which spanned the country and focused on the tribal people of West Bengal. Her provocative Bengali plays frequently portray the tyrannical rule of wealthy upper-caste landowners, feudal lords, moneylenders, and government officials over untouchables and tribal people, more so on women. Mahasweta Devi acknowledges that folklore, ballads, myths, and legends passed down through generations by ordinary people are a constant source of inspiration for her work. She has long believed that the commoners, the oppressed or the marginalised are the ones who create natural history. The paper "Rendering Voice to the Voiceless: A Critical Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Plays" explores how the subalterns find a voice in Devi's works when they are being oppressed to voicelessness in real life.

Keywords:

Marginalised, oppression, exploitation, subaltern, tribals, voiceless.

Mahasweta Devi's writings graphically depict women's oppression in India, highlighting how gender norms and caste systems work hand in hand to keep women at a social and economic disadvantage. In particular, she draws attention to the fact that women experience "double colonisation" as a result of subaltern oppression, marginalisation, violence and gender bias. She

places her narratives dealing with the sexist realities in the context of existing social and economic systems to bring attention to several problems affecting women, including rural poverty, bonded labour, the horrific exploitation of lower-caste and tribal women, their bleak situation in brothels, their wasted youth, their sick bodies, and the terrible plight of their children. She portrays their pitiful situation, sympathises with them, and simultaneously turns the tables on society and the educated people for silently tolerating such atrocities. The marginalisation of marginalised groups and their fight against societal injustice, repression, and suppression have been the overarching goals of this study, as has been the concern of the writer/playwright who wanted to highlight such issues in her writing as a part of her commitment to political activism to fight for the rights of the subaltern.

The play *Mother of 1084* chronicles the turbulent period of Bengal's political history. Subaltern studies have been changing modalities of subalternity and the typical critique view that these studies follow. Her plays show how subaltern people live and how their viewpoints might change when they get their voices heard. When it comes to women's speech, postmodern feminism has taken a progressive stance. In the context of subaltern female studies, which examines Sujata's character through the lens of the gender binary, new ways of thinking about research are emerging. Mahasweta Devi methodically divided the twenty-four-hour period into four-time frames: "dawn," "afternoon," "evening," and "night." This is the notable difference. One may even see it as a chronological storyline whose stated goal is to highlight the many forms of tyranny that Sujata faces inside the Chatterjee family. An examination of the storyline reveals, however, that Sujata's memory and mental health are both helped by a series of flashbacks and memory snapshots that repeatedly interrupt and shatter the linearity. Thus, by breaking the linearity of progression of scientific rationalism as has been championed by the dominant umbrella narrative, the play critiques both the dominant rational paradigms of scientificity as well as the gendered oppression that women suffer within the traditional patriarchal setup.

Ajir, the other play, is a chronicle of abuse and exploitation that shows how the general populace, particularly those without formal education and residing in rural areas, suffers as a result of these decadent social characteristics. As Mahasweta Devi leaves the city for the countryside, she witnesses the systematic murder of innocent people. Even after more than seventy years of independence, the persistence of societal shades of malice, such as bonded labour, in India is incredibly hilarious. Mahasweta Devi's endeavour to creatively convey the oppression of people with low incomes in their encounter with the exploitative harsh framework is at the heart of *Ajir*, a social drama. The enslaved man Paatan's family tree includes members who all signed a bond of slavery. It paints an accurate picture of rural India, where slavery's savage tactics have been at work for generations. The Shudras were enslaved because they were utterly dependent on other Hindu castes

and were denied property, education, and occupational choice. Thus, caste plays a vital role in subjugating people and enslaving them. In the modern day, when the developmental narrative has been championed so much as the shining armour of developing India, how the caste factor yet carries on playing a dominant role in oppressing people has been the concern of Mahasweta Devi in this play.

Aajir has depicted the inner struggle of a bound slave who is believed to be enslaved because of their family's history of slavery. Aajir goes on to show how people with low incomes and uneducated rural people are powerless against exploitation and enslavement because of their lack of education and resources. Mahasweta Devi has brought the tale to life in a stirring theatrical production. "The term aajir stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum," stated three times before the play begins. Just by saying it again and again, this sentence hooks the listeners in. The play's core themes revolve around the social ill of bonded labour and the plight of the oppressed, who endure inhumane treatment and exploitation due to their economic hardship.

In the play *Bayen*, when a mother dies in a train accident, her son restores her position. The protagonist, Chandidasi, is forbidden from communicating with her son Bhagirath, whose father informed her that his mother passed away when he was a baby because she is known as Bayen. As Bhagirath discovers his connection to the Bayen, his innocent heart swells with sympathy for his mother. Even though he knows it is wrong to speak to her, he does it nevertheless, via reflection. Even though the Bayen are known for their superstitions, he is not scared of her. A child's fear of his mother is puzzling. Bhagirath secretly leaves his residence in the dead of night to hear his mother sob after Malindar, Chandidasi's husband, ignores her cries for help. The plays portray the misery that society-ostracized moms go through. They are both traditional Indian ladies who respect men's power and do not dare challenge it. Even if they strive to resist the unfair society, they cannot maintain their revolt. Living a life of seclusion, Chandidasi embraces the moniker Bayen.

Chandidasi is an impoverished and uneducated villager, but Sujata is a well-read metropolitan woman. That is the sole distinction between the two. No matter how much Sujata knows about her husband's infidelity and how much her family despises Brati, she still cannot bring herself to bolt from the house. Neither of these ladies has the bravery to remind her husband of Nora's sacred obligation to herself, as she does in Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. However, Sujata and Chandidasi bear witness to the injustice and endure it silently. Death, strangely enough, brings the moms back together with their children and establishes sincerity in their lives for all time. At the end of *Mother of 1084*, Sujata sobs her heart out at Tuli's engagement party, passionately pleading with the audience to do more than sit on their hands and let society take its toll. Like the Knight's

apologia in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, her plea to the audience is heart-rending and powerful to evoke the audience from their slumber and to think and act to save these women from peril. Her appendix explodes, and she collapses and dies in the end. The play *Bayen* concludes with Bayen's death, revitalising Chandidasi's motherhood identity. Amid her journey to confront Malindar about Bhagirath's nighttime escapes, Chandidasi courageously prevents a train tragedy, sparing the world a significant disaster. However, the train engulfs her, and she dies as a result. The train guard tells her she is an inspiration and wants to award her financially. The villagers reinstate Bayen's status as a "Dome woman" once they learn about the monetary incentive. But Bhagirath, the son of the late Chandidasi, emerges from the crowd and reveals her genuine identity as his mother.

For the first time, viewers of the play *Urvashi O Johnny* can see how Johnny, the champion of the suffering brethren, loses everything and becomes nothing. When he can no longer sing, he cannot provide them with even a temporary respite from the stresses of life. Johnny refuses to abandon his profession, no matter how dire the consequences. A sense of liberation, the ability to find happiness and love in other people, is what he discovers in it. Little Johnny has no parents. Johnny fights for a decent life, in contrast to many orphans who live in filthy slums or on the streets of big cities like Calcutta. He finds ventriloquism to be the answer to his life's problems. He initially uses it as a source of income, but eventually, it consumes him. It provides him with a healthy way to express his emotions.

It is possible to see *Water* as the eternally sad story of the rural peasantry's sorrow. In this play on rural poverty dynamics, we see how public development institutions like the gram panchayat are routinely skewed to maintain caste and class dominance in areas such as water supply, drought relief, education, health, and village government. It is up to the gram panchayat or official representatives to distribute public money for things like schools and hospitals. The criteria for funding guarantee that the poorest receive the most minor benefit, which is ironic. Intimidation, harsh violence, labelling as Naxals, and police reports are common responses to anyone who would seek justice or question the theft of the money. Like the traditional feudal ruler, Santosh, the village chief and a significant landowner and moneylender in the area, operates a distillery that serves people experiencing poverty. To all appearances, Santosh represents the downtrodden Dalit rural agricultural community. A claimant to the "privileges of sight, including those of insight, foresight and even hindsight" are he and his fellow local officials. Using the representative system, Santosh asserts his authority to speak for the villagers and his knowledge of their problems and answers. Dome Maghai is a low-caste peasant who is humble, oppressed, and without land. Even though she is a brave, kind, and independent peasant wife, Phulmani conveys pain and anguish through her scorching stare and sharp responses. Their son, Dhura, shares his mother's fury at the unfair

treatment of their people and expresses that same powerlessness through his angry outbursts and clumsy body language. Gandhian Jiten Maiti falls short when it comes to freeing the children of the oppressed. Mahasweta Devi effectively portrays the plight of a man of monumental stature who fights the environment and the exploitative feudal system in the play *Water*.

By tying Indian literature to more significant social and political issues, Mahasweta Devi was instrumental in establishing a new paradigm for Indian writing. The recurring themes in her works attest to her dedication to addressing the concerns of the country's most vulnerable populations. She was a prolific writer who boldly condemned the oppressive powers that be in her numerous pieces. With very few exceptions, the lives of the oppressed parts of Indian society, especially the Dalits and tribals, are the focal point of nearly all of her works, whether they be creative or activist, especially in her plays and short stories. In all the five plays, which are translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay and collated as the edition called *Five Plays*, Mahasweta Devi brings to the fore the ambivalent position of the dominant order and how caste, gender and other oppressive parameters are used by the dominant order of the society to oppress, victimise and marginalise the voiceless. In addition to offering a space for resistance, her writings expose the subordination of the subaltern in modern society and its power dynamics. Mahasweta Devi shows how opposition can undermine authority and control. Because of this, she made it a point for her downtrodden subaltern populations to speak directly to the audience as they experienced social, political, and economic oppression.

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