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Mapping the Journey of Dalits with Special Reference to Mahasweta Devi

NIHARIKA A. SINGH

Assistant Prof. Deptt. Of English
St. Aloysius College, Jabalpur (M.P.)

**The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction,
While the worst are full of passionate intensity.**

William Butler Yeats

Since the dawn of civilization literature has penetrated every aspect of an individual as well as society reflecting away both the positive and negative things. Literature provides voice to the voiceless and facilitates that the voice reaches many. Literature has turned a potent means to counter humiliation, exploitation and harassment against the fair sex and also for those who are prejudiced for belonging to a particular caste, creed or religion. Dalit assumes a significant place for being charged as victims of various heinous atrocities. They are the most affected lot that rose in 1970s against the existing order of discrimination and biased behaviour of the so called affluent class. Initially, the Bhakti movement saints, Swami Dayanand, Mahatma Gandhi and Jyotiba Phule tried to provide a platform to this depressed class. Only after post independence with the outstanding contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar this could actually be materialized. With the efforts of Marathi writers in the 1970s Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal began a campaign against all odds faced by dalits through writing about them. As a result, dalit literature was born. It is often mistaken that dalits are caste rather it is a constructed identity comprising of not only the schedule castes, tribes and other backward classes but also takes into its

purview any person, group or community that finds itself shoved to the periphery like women.

The journey of dalits is significant and upholds a long history of its own. This paper seeks to map the journey of dalits in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi, a non-dalit writer who writes about dalits with the dalit consciousness. Dalit literature expresses severe pain and anguish suffered by them. These dalit and non-dalit writers proved an old cliché that pen is mightier than sword. Today, dalit literature is explored and researched deeply world over. In India, one can read about them widely in vernacular literature as well. Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer exclusively writes about dalits and their struggle. She writes in Bengali which is later on translated to English. However this form of dalit literature is now translated to English widely which has become an eye opener to many who were uninformed about the real situation of dalits. The hushed and silenced voices of the voiceless have found a vent to ooze out its voice through an effective medium.

Mahasweta Devi writes about dalits with great detail. Her characters are living legends emerging out of the historical stories to the mundane kinds. Her characters outrightly reject the dominance of the centre. They defy their presence and try to create an identity of their own. They desire to

claim a self-created identity and not a forced one. Mahasweta Devi in her indigenous characters like Baba Tirka Majhi, Chotti Munda, Titu Mir and Bashai Munda from her famous novels like *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, *Titu Mir*, and *Bashai Tudu* records their strive for freedom and rightful assertion of their identity. Chotti Munda, Birsa Munda and Titu Mir particularly from the periphery defy the central authority by rising in protest and impressing their identity.

Dopdi in "Draupadi" is an adivsai woman, voicing modern predicament through her bold and violent assertion. She is not ashamed of her nakedness and speaks aloud to the Senanayak claiming her rights. Dopadi along with Dulna Majhi (tribals) are searched by police forces desperately for they killed Surja Sahu and his son. Unfortunately, Dulna is killed while drinking water from the lake. Later on Dopadi arrested and raped by many in order to subdue her. Senanayak said, 'Make her. Do the needful'. (35) This remark by Senanayak is highly symbolic which is uttered to crush the social, economical and political identity of a woman. Any other woman in her place and in such circumstances would have killed herself. After severe pain and agony while many did not feel ashamed of penetrating inside her she resumes her strength and courage forcing every obstacle out of the path to the Senanayak's tent. She rejects the cloth given to hide her naked body and walks naked towards the tent. 'Draupadi stands naked before him, naked. Thigh, Two breasts, two wounds'. (36) She looks around and spits blood over the white shirt of Senanayak. She rejects submission and pushes Senanayak with her chest. It is said, "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with mangled breast and for the first time Senanyak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target'. (37)

Jhasoda is another character born of Mahasweta's pen in the "Breast Giver". She is an incarnation of Yashoda Devi who nurses children and provides life. She always reared a child inside her womb to support breast feeding, to many. Motherhood is her profession and unknowingly she is pulled into it to support her family and earn bread and butter for them. The short-story lay emphasize on the woman's breast symbolic of feeding milk to life created by humans. The irony is that these breasts

become the reason of Jhasoda's illness as she acquires breast cancer. The required medical aid is denied to her by the ones whom she had fed. Jhasoda a representative of motherhood, tender-care, love and compassion all our lost in the wounds of breast. The children of the Haldars house whom she reared most dearly all turn their backs. Though Jhasoda is not a dalit but stands as an envoy of all women who are also dalit in the present connotation.

Sanichari in the famous short-story *Rudali* is another saga of an exploited and humiliated dalit woman. It's a bad luck that Sanichari is born on a Saturday and her mother-in-law abuses her for being *shanichari* (unpropitious). She is looked down by the high caste and offered an illicit relation by a zamindar. She emerges a winner in such odd situation even while deceived by her fate. A life lived devoid of tears ultimately pushes her to become a professional mourner, a *rudali*. In a local story of a dalit woman Sanichari emerges as a national figure and representative for struggle for existence. In *Mother of 1084* Mahasweta Devi traces the naxalite movement and restudies the causes of this revolution of 1970s. Sujata Chatterjee a modern protagonist while understanding the reasons of death of her son Brati, unravels the hidden side of her only son. The short novella delineates the political movement of the naxalites. Brati and his friends receive death for rising against the existing order. Nandini is blinded for being an active participant in this struggle.

Chandidasi Gangadasi (Chandi), a grave digger in "Bayen" is a poignant short story that discloses the traditional excessive behaviour of the superior classes. Witch cult has plagued the society since ages especially the tribals who are believed to practice necromancy and possessed of evil spirits. Though Chandi proud of her profession, after marriage and a son born to her changes completely and wish to stay a normal life like all others. But she is not allowed to do so and thrown out of the village to live a secluded life. She is branded inauspicious, a witch and evil doer. In the end she sacrifices her life in order to save a train being looted. The story questions the social, political and economical marginalization of the behaviour of the so called elite.

In *Romtha* another short fiction by Mahasweta Devi, explores the trauma of a slave, Sharan. The story focuses on the numerous afflictions caused by men over other men who were treated as subhumans. Through Sharan one comes to know how when a man committed crime was treated by the communities of Bengal. He was lashed with ropes, held to the ground, burnt with hot iron into his skin until he could smell his own flesh. He was termed a *romtha* (branded criminal) and lost his identity once with this. Sharan fights back his battle but is defeated and meets untimely death. His death speaks how the right to live a life of free man is denied in the society and it is considered respectful. 'I want to live Chandra' (67) is the desire of Sharan but finds no solace. With the study of the selected characters one can easily understand that the journey of dalits mapped by Mahasweta Devi has great significance. She writes about the past struggle

through her imaginary characters and unfolds the freedom movements of the past. She minutely studies the events and incidents of the tribals and etches out valuable information. Her dalit characters has risen higher and acquired higher status in life. She breaks the stereotyped caricatures while constructing her stories. She strikes the highly sensitive areas of the nation. She constructs her fiction with the aim of an activist intervention in the struggle of the tribals, bonded labour, marginalized rural and women.

Reference :

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