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## Mahasweta Devi: A Women Writer of the Decolonized India

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*"I write for all the people who have been marginalized men, women, and children are all equally abused when they belong to the weaker section of the society . . . . write for all the oppressed people."*

Mahasweta Devi

Women are an integral part of human civilization and constitute half of the world's population but their share in various areas of activity has been totally disproportionate to their size and strength. For ages women have been denied justice-social, economic, political and often considered as the weaker sex. They are largely perceived as dependent and an appendage to men in all walks of life. However, this general belief about women as weaker sex is rejected by the present writers and particularly by women writers. They affirm that the secondary position assigned to women in society is not imposed by natural feminine characteristic rather it is the result of social traditions and education imparted and controlled by men in the society for ages.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is such a category of writer who wrote both in the colonized and decolonized India. As a novelist,

short story writer, playwright, essayist, columnist and social activist, she has relentlessly worked hard for the betterment and upliftment of the rural poor and tribals. Her empathy for the rural poor and tribals is reflected in her writings which regularly provide space for their self expression. They are an integral part of Mahasweta Devi's life and her mission. Her name has almost become synonymous to the tribals. She writes because she considers it as a social obligation to be fulfilled sincerely.

Mahasweta Devi occupies a position of importance among all the other illustrious writers of India and especially amongst women writers. She has championed the cause of many tribal women, about whom she spoke through her stories. They are marginalized and pushed to the periphery for being the 'second sex'. As a writer, Devi makes a point to voice the unheard atrocities inflicted upon women in various forms. Despite attaining independence from the British the situation of the low caste did not improve much in India. The national identity of Indians was demolished and led to the growth of a hegemonic power within free India. The low castes and classes of the country continued to remain in shackles due to the hegemony of the higher castes and classes. Among these, women of the lower castes and classes were the most affected lot. The condition of the marginalized women hardly improved. Mahasweta Devi, during this period, has remarkably portrayed the women in her novels as fighters against all odds in life. She has spent her entire life in close proximity with the tribals. Most of her characters are real and authentic since they are created after gathering first hand information by Mahasweta Devi herself. She dedicated her entire life in the service of the tribals and it may be enumerated that she has achieved significantly. This paper is an attempt to discuss the women characters that Mahasweta Devi has portrayed as emancipated women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The study of such a writer will help one better analyze the psyche of a person who has seen both the rules.

The submissive, docile caricatures of oppressed women are shown as violent women in the present scenario who answer back to all inhuman behaviour met by them. Her tribal women like

Draupadi or Dopdi, Douloti and Mary Oraon are legendary characters and are perfect examples of new women of the decolonized India. A noteworthy thing about the tribal community is that the stringent rules often imposed upon non-tribal Indian women are much relaxed here and allows a tribal women to walk along with tribal men shoulder to shoulder.

The protagonist from the short story "Draupadi," Dopdi Mehjen, is a remarkable character of great courage, boldness and assertion. She has double identity; one as the woman, Draupadi and the other as tribal woman called Dopdi. The name Dopdi reminds us of the famous Draupadi from *The Mahabharata*, who was lost by Pandavas in the game of dice to Duryodhana and was publically stripped by him but miraculously Draupadi escapes this harassment and humiliation unharmed. The attempt to strip her of her clothes was purposely made to dishonour and disgrace her sanctity. Mahasweta Devi revives the myth of Draupadi and cloths it with a different perspective. Dopdi Mehjen is a tribal woman who too faces the same ordeal against Senanayak. Dopdi along with Dulna Mehjen are naxalites fighting against the government. Dopadi imitates men as she drinks, smokes and moves around carrying her scythe. In the story Dopdi is caught, tortured, gang-raped and stripped naked in front of policemen. In order to punish her due to her involvement in the naxalite activities Senanayak commands his men to teach her a lesson. The greatest harm they could inflict on her is dishonouring her body by raping her the entire night. "Make her, Do the needful" (35). However, this attempt is made in vain as Dopdi suffers physically, emotionally and mentally but does not submit to the will of Senanayak. When they try to cloth her she rejects her own clothes and marches towards Senanayak's tent. Her indomitable spirit transforms her into another woman of strength who challenges Senanayak and men like him in the society. "Dopdi stands before him naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breast, two wounds" (36). Senanayak, who is a symbol of the male force, gets scared of a woman for the first time. Dopdi uses her black body as a weapon against the fake identity of men. She says:

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with indomitable laughter that Senanayak



cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky spitting and sharp as her ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man? (37)

Even after being gang-raped she astonishes everybody including Senanayak by her boldness to fight the circumstances. Despite the destruction of her sanctity, she breaks all the earlier set norms of the society of being ashamed and feeling humiliated and rejected after the act. Senanayak is stunned by the behaviour and attitude of Dopdi. She outrightly rejects the idea to submit to the need of Senanayak and so her bold assertion may be assumed to be a NO to all such atrocities:

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. . . . Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breast, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly. (37)

"Douloti, the Bountiful" from *Imaginary Maps*, is another character drawn by Mahasweta Devi who denounces the exploitation of tribals living under the bonded labour system. Though bonded labour system is abolished by law in India yet is still being practiced in certain parts of the country. In case of Doulti, the Bountiful, two types of bonded labourers are witnessed; one in the form of Crook Nagesia and the other in the form of Douloti who is forced to enter prostitution against her will. Due to the brutal behaviour of Munbar Singh Chandela, Ganori Nagesia becomes Crook Nagesia. The inhuman behaviour of Munbar Singh to ask Ganori Nagesia to carry the axe of a carriage on his shoulders leaves him crippled for life. His innocent and sweet daughter Douloti is dragged, as a bonded labourer, in the trade of prostitution in order to clear the debt of rupees three hundred borrowed by her father. Latia Sahib uses all his brutal force upon her to satisfy his lust for three years. He has been in a habit of using tribal women for the satisfaction of his bodily

desires and does the same with Reoti and Somni. Douloti continues to suffer and gets sick due to excessive use of her body. In order to extract more profit from the brothel, each woman was asked to entertain more customers in the same night. The condition of Douloti deteriorates further. No reliefs were offered to her even at the hospital. She continues to drag herself. Finally, she collapses and vomits blood on the map of India from the Himalayas to the peninsula voicing aloud her condition. She dies of a venereal disease. The sad tale of Douloti and the treatment met to her explains how women are still considered as commodities and discarded in the decolonized India. She dies on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1975 in free India. Her body being ploughed innumerable times just to clear a debt of three hundred rupees:

Filling the entire Indian Peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with several disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today on fifteenth of August, Douloti had left no room at all in India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the independence flag. . . .Douloti is all over India. (94)

Mary Oraon from the short story "The Hunt" is another tale, from *Imaginary Maps* about a protagonist who hunts down her target in the form of Tehsildar Singh. Mary Oraon is unlike other tribal women fair in colour and tall only because her father was Dixon's son where her mother Bhikani served. Mary, being fair in colour, though admired by all, does not encourage men to come close to her understanding fully well their intentions. Only Jalim is the fortunate one who comes close to her as she derives security in his company. But trouble begins for Mary after the arrival of Tehsildar Singh in the village. She is approached by him many a times. As a modern woman being aware of the circumstances she is able to sense the beastly nature of Singh and shuns all his advances. But on the day of celebration of the spring season we find Mary transform herself as a hunter or *shikari* and teaches a lesson to Tehsildar Singh by entering the machete inside him and crushing all his future prospects of snatching her sanctity. This

particular act of hers is an answer to all the evil thoughts in evil men about women who is perceived by them as weak, feeble and easy to be hunt down. Here Mary emerges as new women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who is well prepared to assert her rights: "Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, walking the railway in the dark by starlight. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast" (16-17).

Mary victorious is not contented because this was not the first time a woman had suffered. Rather there are more chances of similar instances being repeated. Mahasweta Devi says, "They are your easy victims, they are your prey, you hunt them down. The system hunts them and uses them as target is the criminal" (The Author in Conversation, *Imaginary Maps*, x).

All the three women discussed above emerge and evolve as emancipated women of the decolonized nations. All placed in different situations and circumstances voice their angst against the modern ruthless world. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi, Douloti and Mary are representatives of the modern emerging Indian Women. We find that as a writer of the decolonized India her women offer resistance to the exploitative methods of the so called privileged communities of India. She provides voice to the voiceless and powerless and hitherto neglected communities. She also establishes the supremacy of tribal tradition where women are respected, honoured and treated equal with men. To this writes Vandana Gupta:

Mahasweta Devi, with her active involvement in the tribal people's struggle for maintaining their ethnic identity, right to their lands and freedom to choose their way of life, questions the hegemonies operating in the name of nation and culture. Paralleling the postcolonial, post-feminist agenda of decolonizing the tradition, religion, ethics and every other hierarchical institution, she inscribes a new sexual/textual praxis in her narratives of the tribal, *dalit* women who undergoes double colonization due to her ethnic/caste/class identity and her gender. (41)

### **Works Cited**

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