

“Rape of the People”: Displacement and Dispossession in the Tribal stories of Mahasweta Devi

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One of the most acclaimed writers of novels and short stories in Bengali, Mahasweta Devi is well known for her work as an activist for the various tribes of India and her fight for their rights as human beings and citizen of India. Mahasweta Devi had an unwavering commitment towards those who were marginalized and deprived by the mainstream of Indian society and victims of abject poverty. They were the people who had immense courage and survival instincts but no voice - namely tribal. She writes,

I have sought to bring the harsh reality of this ignored segment of India's population to the notice of the nation; I have sought to include their forgotten and invisible history in the official history of the nation. I have said over and over, our independence was false; there has been no independence for these dispossessed peoples, still deprived of their most basic rights. (Kishore 4)

Mahasweta Devi's stories narrate heart-rending tales of tribal/Dalits and all those marginalized people who have been displaced and dislocated from their natural environment without a fault of their own. The systematic subjugation of the tribal by government and government suffocated machinery is the chief concern of Mahasweta Devi as a writer. The divide between Indian tribes and the rest of India is such that it would have been funny if it was not so pathetic in reality. The word 'Tribal' as 'Tribes' evokes an image of half clad gleaming dark bodies of young men and women dancing with abandon, white teeth shining with practically no care in the world. The narratives of Mahasweta Devi shatter this image brutally and leave no scope for the reader for pretension or escape. Commenting on this divide, Mahasweta Devi writes:

The Tribal and the mainstream have always been paralleled- there has never been a meeting point. The Mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel. As long as the forests were there, the hunting tribes did not suffer much because the forest used to provide them with food, shelter, timber, and hunting. But now the forests are gone, the tribal are in dire distress. (Devi iii)

She talks about the Lodhas and Khedias, the small hunting tribes which have suffered greatly due to deforestation and dislocation. The Post Independent India seem to have left a sizable chunk of its population behind, those who were homeless and voiceless because they were not seen by urban India. Any effort on their part to be heard or seen was greatly resented as revolt against the country and hence brutally repressed. Commenting on this deliberate disregard and evasion in her story 'Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Peeche', Mahasweta Devi ironically states how an entire nation's psyche can be aroused with a cheap song while the other important issues fail to do so. She writes:

When it (the song Choli Ke Peeche) became a national issue, the other fuckups of that time- e.g. Crop failure- earthquake, everywhere clashes between so called tenants and state power and therefore killings, the beheading of a young man and woman in Hararyana for the crime of marrying out of caste, the unreasonable demands of Medha

Patkar and others around the Narmada Dam, hundreds of rape- murder- lockup torture etcetera non-issues which by natural law approached but failed to reach highlighting in the newspapers- all this remained non-issues. (140)

The story 'Behind the Bodice' reveals this gap between the mainstream represented by Upin and the marginalized Gangor. Gangor and her group of men and women are dislocated from their original habitat due to famine and are brought as bonded labour by the contractors of a Kiln to Jharoa. Gangor with her ample young breasts attracts the attention of Upin, an urban international photographer interested to bring unusual species from hinterland to the plastic world of people like his own wife. He becomes obsessed with Gangor's breasts, taking pictures, willing to give money for them. He even takes out a slogan in newspapers, "The half naked ample breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped, save them! Save the breast!" (142)

The breasts which overflow 'like full pitchers' become the symbol of the natural beauty and productivity of mother earth which with the cutting of forests, lies unprotected and barren, divested of fertile land and trees. Upin feels that Gangor's breasts are endangered but he is not able to visualize that the danger lies deeper and has far reaching effects. Ironically, as Mahasweta Devi points out in the story the 'famine' or 'semi famine' conditions find place in national and international press but nothing happens to improve the conditions of famine struck peasants.

Gangor has come to Jharoa with other dislocated peasants who were caught in the aftermath of famine. They work as daily wages in the kiln for 'light bricks and tiles'. For the displaced it is not only the physical but the cultural displacement as well. The first thing they realize as they enter mainstream society is that being natural is wrong. Nakedness is abhorred while lust, greed, cruelty, apathy are the norms of the civilized world. Sheetal's artificial silicon breasts are approved and safe while Gangor's natural ones are 'endangered'. Her mistrust in men is justified as she understands that "even when gentlemen distribute relief, they have some hidden agenda" (144) Upin has this persisting feeling that "Gangor and her chest were endangered" (150) but Upin fails in his role as a saviour. Gangor's appeal to Upin's friend clearly states her traumatic conditions when she says: "Tell the Camera Sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear- a bite to eat... a place to sleep for mother and child... What to do Sir... no field, no land, living is very hard..." (146) The Contractors as she tells Upin "are not good people" (146) not allowing her husband to live with her.

Gangor, a spirited woman, a survivor and a seeker for justice, pays a prize for her audacity and tenacity to hold on to life, with all that she has in her possession, namely her beautiful breasts and her body. She commits the crime of crossing over the haloed boundaries of Indian Police, complaining to them, complaining against them. As the Contractor tells Upin "the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them." (152) Her courage seems to be her undoing as she decides to press charges rather than running away from situation. Unfortunately, it is a town where "a new police station means more harassment for women". (154) After being gang raped brutally, Gangor is thrown into prostitution by the Contractor and his men. Divorced from her clan, shunned by the town people, Gangor is forced to hug prostitution. Her smouldering rage in her last meeting with Upin symbolizes the violent

rebellion of tribal against the civilized world. By the time Upin, who represents the apathy and disregard of the mainstream, realizes that “there is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it” (157), its too late.

In Mahasweta Devi’s stories, rape becomes a metaphor for disrobing, dispossessing and divesting one of every possible thing or feeling on this earth, even honour and shame. In different stories of Mahasweta Devi, the protagonists are gang raped in various situations only the name changes. Dropdi, Gangor, Josmina, Sanichari, the equation remains the same. The hegemony of the government machinery, moneylenders and the so called rich and civilized on the one hand and the poor tribal/bonded labours/marginalized on the other. Although the women are the ultimate victim of this system generated subjugation, the entire tribe is raped by the government which has promised ‘adequate safeguards’ (Guha) for them in the constituent assembly of India. The exploitation continues to be propelled further by the urban rich developers, businessmen, landlords and so on.

The rightful possessions of tribal are taken away by the so called civilized who are actually ‘intruders’ in their world (Guha). The tribal are dispossessed of land, livelihood, and have to deal with unfriendly laws and hostile government machinery which suppresses them. When for their survival, the tribal take up arms they commit the ultimate crime- that of fighting for their rights and consequently they are abused, tortured, raped in the garb of being naxalites. Here, I will refer to another shocking and much discussed story of Mahasweta Devi, *Draupadi* for taking this discourse further. Based on the Naxalbari rebellion of the peasants in 1967, Delphi, narrates the tale of the protagonist Dopdi, the young santal rebel, who is pursued and chased by paramilitary forces after her husband Dulna’s death. Dopdi and Dulna fight for the honour of their tribe as well as their fundamental rights. Being young and courageous they challenge the unfair practices of Surja Sabu, the moneylender of their village, and consequently, kill him.

Dopdi, who fights with the system with all her courage, knows what her fate might be. She is ready for ‘counter’ knowing that “when they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound”. (192) The drought in Birbhum and the water scarcity leads to a rebellion as Surja Sahu does not allow the poor tribal to have water, turning them into bonded labour. Dulna is a bonded labour at Surja Sahu’s fields and knows he has been short changed by him. Dopdi is eager to kill the lecherous man who eyes women with a “watering mouth” (193)

Dopdi is proud of her tribe, the same tribe which is treated as landless, untouchable, poor and marginalized labourers, once contained the “pure unadulterated black blood of Champabumi... Dopdi felt proud of her forefather. They stood guard over their women’s blood in black armour”. (193) She cannot understand the betrayal or disloyalty to the tribe. The pure santal blood in her does not recognize these traits. Their mission is to wipe out “landowners and moneylender and policemen” (193) the three mechanisms which are out to displace and destroy the tribal. Dopdi keeps this mission alive even after Dulna’s death. Armed as unarmed the ‘target’ is the entire race of tribal as they are good only if they let themselves be used silently by the

landowners like domestic animals. Silence and surrender are the two things expected from them.

Dopdi is stripped off her honour, dignity and even her shame. When she is raped throughout the night by Senanayak's men at his order, she rebels not only against the male hegemony but also the biological constraints of her body which hamper her path of seeking justice and honour for her tribe. By choosing to remain unclothed, she not only defeats her enemy but also takes a stand for repairing the dignity and pride which Senanayak had tried to snatch from her.

Dopdi with her "mangled breasts" (37) and Gangor with "two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat" (157) try to chart out their own discourse or protest. Gangor on the other hand tries to be a part of the system for survival but becomes a lone fighter when she dares to raise her voice against injustice. Mahasweta Devi's stories offer an insider's view and articulate her concern over the terror unleashed by ruthless government machinery against poor tribal. The laws which were supposed to protect the marginalized of the country are used to repress and forcibly evict them from their own habitat and environment. The rape of the women becomes the rape of the land and its people, whereas the choices are few- either to hide the wounds like Gangor and staying within the system or by choosing to rebel and exposing the wounds to the outside world like Dopdi, shatter the veneer of sophistication and apathy that the society wears like Senanayak.

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