



UNCENSORED VOICES: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI AND BAMA

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses the impact of censorship on creative arts, especially, literature. Censorship of creative arts dates back to Plato who insisted on the 'exile of poets'. Here is made an attempt to show how today's 'Platos' have been attacking severely some books and other creative arts (for instance, the paintings of M. F. Hussain) for being "Satanic", "anti-family", "anti-Hindu", "anti-Christian" and "anti-Islamic". Such acts of censorship which is controlled by a small group or organization or government are as threatening to liberty of thought and expression as any anti-social or anti-national activities. Further, this paper convinces the urgent need of voice of unity (of creative writers) against the narrow minded, curtailing power of such elements of censorship.

For this purpose some selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Bama are considered. Both the writers raise their voices against such powerful institutions as government and church. If their works were caught in the sharp net of censorship, the agonized voices of tribals and dalits would have become 'bootless cries' before 'deaf heaven'. This paper focuses how these writers dare cross such hurdles and stand firm for a noble cause.

Key Words: censorship, creative arts, threatening, curtailing, bootless cries.

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The present paper analyses the impact of censorship on creative arts, especially literature. Censorship has as old a history as literature does. Though it has attracted the attention of creative world largely these days, its ever dormant existence cannot be denied. Many ingenious creations have been targeted by the so called orthodox and religious ideologies by labeling such creations as "anti-Christian", "anti-Islam", "anti-Hindu", "Satanic" and what not. These narrow and fundamentalist minded groups use common people's feelings, sentiments and emotions to their agenda of heaping attack on such liberal creations

by telling—many a time deliberately—'hurt the sentiments of people' or 'against a particular religion's belief or values'. Even some times one cannot deny hidden political agenda in such censoring attempts.

All such efforts of censorship work as huge and strong tide which pushes dead and waste things to the shore. The history tells us the literary world has suffered the brutal force of this tide of censorship whenever liberal thoughts or ideas or feelings or experiences about a religion or class or caste or society or government or practice or system are expressed. But at the same time many writers

have proved their vigour, valour and endurance whenever they have felt this force of censorship wave. The literary world has so many great names on this list. The recent addition to this list are the names of Mahasweta Devi and Bama.

Both these writers are from different geographical, cultural, social and economical background. While Mahasweta Devi is from West Bengal, an eastern state stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south, Bama hails from Tamil Nadu which lies in the southern most part of Indian peninsula. Culturally both these writers belong to different experiences as well as socially and economically.

These names may not be internationally known in the field of creative writing as Taslima Nasreen or Salman Rushdie and the like. But this paper intends to share an idea that any creative writer or writing can become a target of censorship anytime and anywhere irrespective of region, writer's popularity or the subject it throws light upon.

The subject they took has similarity though the people/victims for whom they raise their voice are different. Devi worked and fought for the cause of tribals. In her such attempt she had to incur the wrath of the government and its agencies like police system. Bama challenged the very attitude of the Church against Dalit Christians. Voicing out one's views against the all powerful government set up and religious institutions is not a task that everyone can undertake. These political and religious powers do not accept any opinions expressed against them. If anything of this sort is done they use all their authority and pressure to change or stop those views or thoughts spreading further. Any efforts to overcome these hurdles and make the work of art reach the public (readers) is as strenuous a task as swimming against rough tides.

Censorship can happen at any stage of creation of a work of art though the issue of censorship gets currency after the creation gets opened to the world. The tentacles of this censorship can reach the very beginnings of such creation. This seems true in the case of Devi. She wrote about the exploitation of the tribals by money lenders, capitalistic landlords, religious heads,

bureaucracy and the police system. Before her writing she stayed with the tribals months together, tried to understand their joys and sorrows. All her exercise in this regard was known by the agencies of exploitation. Devi faced many obstacles in this adventure. She was forced to stop her writing altogether or not to mention in her writings about those who were responsible for the plight of the tribals. One can understand the difficulties of her journey on this 'thorny path' in her own words as she points out in a U.G.C. programme telecast on DD-1, "I trod where the Indians feared to tread."

From 1976 on, Mahasweta Devi has become more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the tribal and underprivileged communities settled in the border regions of the three neighbouring states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Devi has a special place in her heart for the tribals and other marginalized sections of our society. "I write about the exploited and the exploiter", she declares. The exploiters operate through mainly three modes of power which make the subaltern suffer. These are:

1. Communal mode of Power: Communal authority may be exercised through a council of elders or of leading families, or even by a chief or patriarch. Examples: "Witch", "Bayen".
2. Feudal mode of Power: It is characterized fundamentally by sheer superiority of muscle power, that is, a relationship of domination. Examples: "Seeds", "Water".
3. Bourgeois mode of Power: Here, unlike the feudal, there is the domination of non-producers, that is, capitalists, over the producers, that are wage labourers through impersonal operation of the market. Example: "Salt".

Devi's attack on the government is direct and critical. In *Bashai Tudu* she writes ironically:

In a democracy the government would never violate the fundamental rights of a small peasant to be victimized by his jotedar or his moneylender. The Indian constitution respected every citizen's fundamental right to become whatever he could by dint of his guts. The poor therefore had the right to become poorer

still. A peasant today had the right to be a landless agricultural labourer tomorrow (87).

Devi very poignantly portrays her characters being gang raped by the police when they are in custody. Draupadi's words to the Senanayak shows Devi's anger towards the police raj. Draupadi, naked comes closer to Senanayak turning down the guards order to put on her clothes and "shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, 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?" (Devi 36). She spits a bloody gob at Senanayak's white shirt and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed."

Bama's *Karukku* exposes the hypocrisy of the churches and Christian convents. It highlights the deep rift between Christian beliefs and practice. Chapter 8 of this book is a direct attack on Christianity and its 'followers'. She explains her reading about the woman who founded the order and whose love for the poor and the lowly made her join the convent as a nun. But she was disillusioned very soon by the way things take place in and around church and convent. She tells about the variety food served in the huge convent, how they talk about Lord Jesus, Our Lady and the disciplines of the order. She also exposes the "such jealousies, such competition, such arrogance that one could only survive by one's own strategies, guile and cunning" (96). The convent's greed, partiality, favouritism, uselessness of prayers, ill treatment of the poor, the huge void between preaching and practice and the poor opinion about the dalit Christians make one think about the religion. She satirizes the Christian schools as profit making centers. For questioning all these 'forbidden sides' of Christianity she was transferred to five different places within a month.

All her experiences as a nun in convent are shocking. To write in such a direct attacking way any writer would need confidence and courage. To challenge or question a religion or its institutions like church and convent would have incited anger and

opposing voices and stopped the book from being published if the voices which believe in the liberty of expression were submissive. But today's literary world (both writers and readers) has become strong enough to resist any such efforts of threat because of the spirit of liberty, reason and such constitutional privileges given to a person.

If the resistance to the censorship is not as strong as it today, the world would not have seen the number of creative minds it has today. The ideas of such great minds would not have ignited the young minds. Many agonized voices would not have been heard. Even they were heard no effort would have taken place to soothe them. But luckily times have changed. Though such creations are rejected, opposed, condemned, criticized, banned and such writers are exiled from one country or region, the same creations and writers are widely accepted, appreciated and given shelter in other country or region.

Such creations of art (here literary work) would bring considerable changes for the oppressed who have been waiting and striving to improve their lot. Hence a book can do what a group cannot. That is, a writer can bring solace, justice, a sense of equality to those who are suppressed, marginalized, neglected for ages through his/her writing. Such cries for equality, justice, freedom, opportunities, education and such human necessities would now will not become "bootless cries" before the 'deaf system'.

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