



## MAHASWETA DEVI AS A POSTCOLONIAL WRITER AND ACTIVIST

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### ABSTRACT

Literature in Bengali Language has been very lavish, affluent and numerous in all its forms from various centuries. Most of it, exists in Bengali language, but some of it has been translated into other languages. Works of writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Agha Shahid Ali, Mahasweta Devi, and many more have been exclusively translated into English language. Mahasweta Devi is accounted as one of the best known Indian writers. She is reputed as an inventive, creative, profuse and bestselling author of the short stories and novels in Bengali language. Simultaneously, she has also been tagged as a deeply political social activist who has taken up the cause of oppressed and the downtrodden members of the society, as she wrote for the salvation of unrewarded labor class. Her writings have brought up a new hope to the battered humanity. She has written forty two novels, fifteen collections of stories and books for children. Her powerful stories have made her one of the best-known, and incessantly translated, among India's authors. The themes of her short fictions and novels, is deeply political, social, and active. She has also been the one working with and for tribals and marginalized communities. In this article, the main aspects conveyed in the stories "Draupadi", "The Wings on Fire" and "Breast Giver", written by Mahasweta Devi, shall be discussed.

KEYWORDS: Draupdi, Breast Giver, Agnigarva, Mahasweta Devi, Postcolonialism Bengali Literature, Short Stories, Feminism, Translated Literature.

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Mahasweta Devi has made paramount benefaction to literary and cultural studies in India. Her articles, as a socio-political commentator, have regularly appeared in the economic and political Weekly, Frontier. Her powerful, haunting tales of ill treatment and grapple have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse by leading scholars. She has been a very significant character in the field of socially committed literature. Her writings have been presented as a weapon in her hand to be used in the war against social injustice. In order to convey her point, she repeatedly takes amenity to authorial involvement; subsume explanatory remarks with apothegmatic concluding comments. These skills

have made her writings more famous and popular not only among the people of India but also among the people of the other countries.

Her writings have been usually based on the show of reality. Through her writings she basically meant to present before the readers the common facts, the first hand material truths of life. She conjectures that fiction must originate from true, historical facts. In her novels and short stories, she has usually quoted the misuse of tribal females, according to feministic point of view. The common motif suppressed in her congregate short fiction collection, Breast stories, is that of breast, which has been translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Spivak has correctly pointed out that breast in mahasweta's stories, is more than a just a symbol. It has become a means of a harsh indictment of a social system where women are badly exploited. The protagonist Dopdi Mehen, in a short story "Draupadi" has been portrayed as a tribal guerrilla, who is first arrested and later brutally gang raped in police custody. But later she reciprocates against her exploiters in an aggressive manner as she uses atrocious wounds of her breasts to instigate a counter offensive. In "Breast Giver" a women becomes a salaried wet-nurse just to support her family, later she dies of a painful disease named breast cancer, abandoned by both her breasts and a dozen of sons who have feed on her.

Mahasweta Devi was born in East Bengal into a family of renowned and politically engrossed artists and scholars of Dhaka. Her father was an eminent writer. So she was inspired by him and inherited literary activity. She graduated in 1946 from Santiniketan, one of the famous school's inaugurated by Rabindranath Tagore, after that, in collaboration with her first husband, she dedicated many years for political activism in rural bengal. She held a variety of jobs, including teaching. She also wrote many columns and articles for journals. She received a master's degree in English literature in 1963 from Calcutta University and became an English professor at a Calcutta college. Her early works were motivated by affairs of social justice. She was also a rural reporter of Bengali Daily "the jugantar". Along with Swami Agniveh she organized the welfare societies to tribal and oppressed groups to enable them to fight for their basic human rights. She has been awarded with Magsaysay award, a prestigious award for human rights activists in 1997 and Gyanpeeth award for highest honor in literature in 1996.

Mahasweta Devi's art of writing is born out of impatience and range. In the introduction to one of her novel's Agnigarva (The Womb of Fire), she writes:

"In these thirty-one years after independence I have not seen our people attaining true independence in anything-in food, water, land, loan, or bonded labor.....I have no hopes of this conviction being shaken during my lifetime. Thus I

have written only about humanity to the best of my ability so that I do not have to feel ashamed to face myself."

A study of her novels reveals two important facets of her social criticism. On the other hand there is her deep distrust of the privileged upper classes who are either directly taking part in the oppressive dynamics of Indian society, or living in ivory towers, preferring to ignore its ugly realities. On the other hand she expresses her heartfelt respect for the uneducated poor villagers with their goodness and their backs that refuse to be broken despite of century's oppression. Her work Standavini can be exemplified as an allegory of oppression. It is a work dedicated to the themes of class and sex based ill treatment with women. Another perspective of reading the work is through dialectical relationship betwixt hierarchy power relations of a family and the mysterious legacy of British imperialism.

Her thought is mainly preoccupied with the tribal's living on the edge. She says that she finds, even after many years of independence "....my people are still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness.....failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints. This is the only source of inspiration for all my writings."

She gets involved in the lives and daily struggles of the penurious tribal women. Injustice is faced by these tribal women but most of them fight against this injustice and try to present a new courage which helps them to brawl against the social oppression and violence and try to break the age old compositions of racial and gender prejudice. She promotes a struggle on behalf of de-notified tribes of India who were stigmatize as 'natural criminals' by the British Colonial State. Her support for indigenous communities has been long standing and immense. Mahasweta Devi as an Indian intellectual is known for her feminist, deconstructionist and subaltern criticism in cultural texts and her own radical writings. Her writings tell us about the stories of those Indian women who have been engaged in the cycles of holiness. The position of subaltern in Indian society is the main theme of mahasweta devi that has been skillfully underlined through the lower caste people. She has

been one of those who started writing history from below, marking those people as important who never had any history of their own or have been deliberately left out to rot. She herself explains:

“There is a faceless existence. They are in India from ancient times.....yet the mainstream India has continually refused to recognize them....”.

The subaltern women characters of Mahasweta Devi's stories stand up for their own protection at various times as they do not accept vanquishment. As in her famous story “Draupadi”, the female character Dopdi feels that the shame inflicted upon her is not her shame rather it is a shame for the rapist. The last lines make us move with the deepest thoughts of the character, which make us see through their strength:

“Draupadi pushes the senanayak with her two mangled breasts, for the first time senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.”

In yet another story “The Breast Giver”, Mahasweta Devi delineates Joshoda as the subaltern. She is completely a reflection of Indian women, whose unintelligent and unreasoning devotion towards her husband and the tender love for her children kept alive the basic background of every Indian women life.

Her stories also contain a theme of post-colonialism. They must operate with the resources of a history shaped by colonization against the legacy of colonization. The translator of the Breast Stories is Gayatri Spivak, who admits that she translated the story “Draupadi” as much for the sake of its villain Senanayak, as for its title character, Draupadi (Dopdi). In Senanayak, Spivak recognized a very close resemblance to the first world scholar in search of the third world scholar (Dopdi). The first world scholar, Senanayak, must destroy the enemy, the menacing other. There is a sense of sorrow for the third world women who have to lose themselves in order to be free in the world. Spivak's approach has been affected by ‘deconstruction practice’. Mahasweta Devi in the introduction of her famous short story collection ‘Agnigarbha’ (The Womb of Fire) politically declared:

“Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics.”

In Aramer Adhikar (The Rights or Occupation of the Forest), Mahasweta Devi has shown a clear change. The book is a thoroughly investigated historical novel regarding the Munda Insurrection of 1899-1900. In this the writer begins with putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, tribal Bengali and the language of the tribals. So another important theme which can be seen in Mahasweta Devi's works is that of the struggle of tribal communities within India. Her works are a pure canvas that displays the empowerment of the tribal's and her close association with them. Her writings also largely portray the inner lives of these tribal communities and landless laborers through powerful dialogues in the regions locally used dialects. In today's modern writings, her writings are thought of as the writings known for giving voice to the “voiceless section of the Indian society”.

According to Mahasweta Devi the women is the one who has to bear and not only bear but also have to suffer from suppression. She is both marginalized as a women as well as a low caste. So, she is “doubly subaltern” if it comes to subaltern women studies, doubly subaltern means concern for the woman who was marginalized as woman as well as she belongs to a lower caste. The themes of her writings have majorly been doubly subaltern. Dopdi Mehjan in “Draupadi” is a major example of doubly subaltern character, as she belongs to the tribal community and she is sexually ill treated by the custodians of law.

Another theme that can be debated in the story “Draupadi”, shall be the similarities and dissimilarities between the Draupadi of The Mahabharata and that of Dopdi, an exploited character in the story. The character's name has been portrayed and introduced to us between two uniforms and between two versions of her name, Dopdi or Draupadi. The ancient Draupdi is perhaps the most celebrated Indian epic Mahabharata's heroine and on the other hand Dopdi is a tribal woman and moreover she has got no right to have a heroic Sanskrit name. This pious, domesticated

Hindu name was given to Dopdi at the time of birth by her mistress in the usual mood of benevolence felt by the rich master's wife toward the tribal bonded servant. In the epic, Draupdi has been married to five pandava brothers. She is exceptional, singular wife of her husband's. Mahasweta Devi's story questions the singularity as she places Dopdi first in a comradely, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. Draupdi was the one to instigate the crucial battle between the society of the men, in the same way Dopdi is the one who stands against the cruelty of the law and injustice.

Mahasweta Devi is also a deeply political, social activist who has been working with and for the tribal's and marginalized communities. Devi remarks:

"I wish for no more sati's, no more dowry deaths, no more honor killings, no more flesh being bought or sold....."

All her strong women characters like Jashoda, Dopdi, Dulali, Andi and many more, all have left a very strong impression. She says:

"let the downtrodden awake, let the forgotten faces and muffed voices to arise to claim their own.....let my India awaken again and again. It is a big dream, I know, but not an impossible one...."

Thus portraying the life of exploited women in the novels, and short stories Mahasweta Devi expressed that women should not passive and submissive and should realize their own inner strengths which they posses. They should also be aware of the fact that their own existence is meaningful and should re-shape their lives according to the new set perspective of freedom.

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