

‘Human Rights And The Subaltern In The Short Stories By Mahasweta Devi’

Dipak Kumar Mandal

Dept. Of English

M.A, B.Ed

Purulia, West-Bengal

Abstract

Human rights is intimately involved with human beings from the initial stage of civilization. Human refers not only the elite male person but all kinds of man including poor, beggar, children and also the female and therefore human rights also should be equal to all. The constitution of India preamble has clearly declared equal justice of social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity etc. to all Indian. But with grief, the true fact is that these showcased human rights are not applied to the subaltern. These rights were valueless for them in the past in ‘Mahabharata’ and ‘Ramayana’ as Karna, Eklavya, Sita were misjudged and also valueless at present time. They are always deprived from the common human rights and they even could not get their food and cloth to live. They are forced to lose their ‘Dui Bigha Jami’ as well their human value and are victimized by the so called elite and bhadrakalok. And now-a-day it takes a very deep shape to the subaltern. We are failed to keep Sukanta’s promise_ “*I shall make this world a place of living for the children./ It is .my stern promise.*”(Chharpatra). In this pathetic condition, I would argue that literature is the only way to show light and right path of how to break the bar and wall and to re-established the human rights for the subaltern. I would choose four short stories by Mahasweta Devi ‘Draupadi’, ‘Dhouli’, ‘Rudaali’ and ‘Breast Feeder’. These books show that though the subaltern figures are deprived from the human rights and also misjudged by the so called bhadrakalok, they do not break down and act as weapon themselves against the elite and earn their human rights. Mahasweta Devi raises up the constitution of India and encourage the subaltern to earn their rights. It proves that human rights is re-established through literature.

Key words: Subaltern; human rights; myth figure; Mahasweta Devi

INTRODUCTION:

Human Rights are those minimum rights which are compulsorily obtainable by every individual as he/she is a member of human family. The constitution of India also guarantees the equality of rights of men and women and also to the subaltern. However in the sphere of subaltern's Human Rights in India, there exist a wide gulf between theory and practice. Indian society is divided in three parts-i) Upper or Bhadrolok society, ii) Middle society and iii) Lower society. The lower people in India who are actually the subaltern class have to face discrimination, injustice and dishonour from the upper two classes. The women in lower class are double or multiple subaltern because of being a woman and member of lower class. Though in theoretically they have more rights as compared to two upper class and men but practically that have not done. Aging through age, century to century these discrimination has going on, as we have seen in '*Ramayana*' and '*Mahabharata*' no one can stop it and the subaltern have habituated in these matter. Plato the great philosopher in the world has said that literature is the representation of society sometimes in a distorted manner or sometimes in a pretentious manner, but my argument is that the act of literature ins not only like the history to only act as the documentation of the incident happened in the society or culture but it has act as medicine or an act as pioneer way to solve the problems of society. This paper has based on Human Rights and the problems of subaltern class; so it includes the role of literature to solve the problems of human rights .

The constitution of India has granted equal rights to all kinds of men and women. According to article 14 "The state shall not deny to any person equally before law or the equal protection of laws within the territory of India." And article 15 states "state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. But today, it seems that the written rights are not applicable to the subaltern. They have always been considered subordinate to upper and middle class. They are always deprived from their daily livelihood, food, cloth, shelter etc. The female group in the subaltern society are more violated because they are not only deprived from daily livelihood but also assaulted both by the upper, middle and lower class in the grounds of sex. The great literary fighter Mahasweta Devi through her literature creates an awareness and has awoken the subaltern women to fight against this discrimination of human rights and empowered themselves. She in her every text analyses that human rights of article number 14 and 15 are not applicable to the subaltern either by caste, race, place or birth or by region or sex.

CONTEXT:

The term 'subaltern' in its original meaning refers to sub-ordinate groups within military hierarchies. Antonio Gramsci, the originator of subaltern studies in his '*Prison Notebook*', expanded its meaning to include the proletariat and other social groups who were outside the structures of political organisations. Proletariat refers the people of daily earning and eating and who deprives from any kind of social activity (the men who live in outside of city). In India Ranajit guha is the founder of subaltern school states in his essay, "*On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*" that in the domain of elite politics, there existed the labouring population and they called subaltern. On the other hand Dipesh Chakrobty in his book "*Provincializing Europe*" focuses on the three basic questions and the most prominent questions about the subaltern is –'How does one represent subaltern subjects without appropriating their voice?' and Gayitry Chakroborty Spivak problematized this issue in her essay, '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' According to her speak is the action, it acts as agent, agency or subject. In this way she first talks about the voice of the subaltern. If the subaltern have not the power to speak, they never be empowered themselves and never have dreamt to restablish their own human rights. And Mahasweta devi gets them voice in her stories and shows how they achieve their own rights.

SUBALTERN IN INDIA:

During the British empire, subalternity was viewed in the terms of race difference. They are mainly poor, scheduled castes. Discrimination and cruelty still exists in all states in India. Looking from the perspective of workers, lower castes and women the need of the time is a call for the tangible actualisation of human rights.

MAHASWETA DEVI

Mahasweta Devi has born in 1926 in the city of Dacca in East Bengal (modern day Bangladesh). As an adolescent, she and her family moved to west Bengal in India. Born into a literary family Devi was also influenced by her early association of Ganantya, a group who attempted to bring social and political to rural villages in 1930s and 1940s.

After finishing her masters in English Literature from Calcutta university , she began working as a teacher and journalist. Her first book , *Jhansir Rani* was published in 1956. In the last fifty years Devi has published 20 collections of short stories and close to a hundred novels, primarily in her native language of Bengali. She has also been a regular contributor to several literary magazines such as *Bortika*, a journal dedicated to the cause of oppressed communities within India. Her writing/ theme of writing based on the oppressed class which

is termed as subaltern. Her works are translated in English by Gayitry Chakroborty Spivak who is also a fighter of the subaltern people. Devi herself concentrates and dedicates to serving the needs of the poor people in India and her writing influenced the poor to fight against the discrimination. Her stories like *Draupadi*, *Dhouli*, *Rudaali*, *Breast Giver* etc. addresses the oppression of the Indian subaltern. In these stories she depicts the life of adivasis and tribals people and at the same time show some way in how they can fight against the discrimination and established their own rights as an Indian.

Her mission is to continue working with them who are desolate and unprepared for India's political system; their deprivation from their common human rights. She spends days and months living with the people she writes. Her stories are the real visualisation of her own. Her books focus in on the simplistic lifestyles of the tribes but more importantly their sufferings, exploitation and their selves empowerment to achieve the theoretical human rights in the Indian preamble.

DROUPADI:

Draupadi is a dissident voice in the short story '*Draupadi*' by Mahasweta Devi against the so-called Bhadrak society apparently in India and metaphorically throughout the whole world. Though, the name is copied from the very same name Draupadi of the epic '*Mahabharata*', she is quite different from her according to class, caste and respect and she is much more different from her at the point of courage of rebellion against the villains. She is much more radical, more courageous than the epical Draupadi. Interestingly enough, belonging in a tribal society, Droupadi has not the power to achieve such gorgeous name as they are treated as marginalised and underdogs, but she gains her name from Surja Sahu, the Mahajan's wife. In fact, in her own tribal society she is not known as Draupadi, but Dopti Mejhen. In '*Mahabharata*', Draupadi was born out of fire and in the short-story, Draupadi has shouted her courage like fire by saying, "*What more can you do? come on? Come on? Counter me- come on, counter me-?*" (page 402: *Chicago Journals: Critical Inquiry*, vol.8, No.2)

During the governance of Indira Gandhi in India, the Naxal Movement is organised by the tribal society against the Jamindar, and Mahasweta Devi is influenced by their courage and also tributes their movement, but during the battle they suffer most and are assaulted by the preserver members of the society/law. And being a woman- multiple subalternised_ Draupadi's suffering and assault is a bitter shame to all the people.

Dopti Mejhen and her husband Dulna Mejhen are the leaders of the Naxal Movement from the Bankrajhar Jungle in Bankura. Murdering surja Sahu and his son, they go underground for a long time in a Neanderthal darkness. For this, a special force is included by the head of this Police Dept. Betrayal is a very

common factor in Indian society and Dulna Mejhen is arrested by the betrayal of Dukhram Gharari and is killed by the police forces. Senanayak's process of arresting the enemy is *'in order to destroy the enemy is in order to destroy the enemy became one'* (page 395) and in this way he always tries to become one of tribal people but never achieves this. Dopti loves Dulna more than her blood and after his death, she now disguises herself as Upi Mejhen and contains the operation of Jharkhani Forest. She remains in Mushai Tudu's wife's house and goes to bazar for brings some medicine. In this time again some betrayal like Shomai and Budhna inform the police about Upi Mejhen. The police encounter wanted 'Draupadi Mejhen' whether dead or alive, with the price of one-hundred rupees.

She is caught by the police and *"Now she spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns toward the force of her entire being. One, twice, three time. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far"* (page 401).

The police encounters bring her at 6.53p.m, one hour after her apprehended. During one hour in the camp no one ever touch her but at the time of Senanayak's dinner at 8.57 p.m. he orders *"Make her. Do the needful."* Then a billion moons pass and she is raped by several times by the police officers. Next day it is declared that Draupadi is captured to the public and bring her to Senanayak in full naked. Senanayak wants to give her cloth but she refuses it and courageously without any shame she voices *"you asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"* and she goes closer to Senanayk and cries up *'What's the use of cloth? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man?'* She also cries up, *"There is not aman here that I should be ashamed, I will not let you put my cloth on me- come on, counter man_?"* (page: 402)

This Draupadi is totally different from the epican Draupadi, while she was robed out, Lord Krishna acted as Duex-ex-machina and covered her shame, but here Draupadi does not want any cloth to robe her instead of it she cries out that Senanayak and his police encounters are not men, they are beast and Draupadi does not shy near to a beast.

The text Draupadi can be read as an agit prop story as it deals with a movement called Naxal Bari and for it the new law has also passed by the Govt. Here Dopti and Dulna Mejhen raise against the torture of so called Bhadrlok society. Through their movement they have tried to break the totems and taboos of Indian society and re-established the human rights. They also show how to fight against the taboos of society. Dulna has died before finishing his aim of life, but Dopti does not stop, no one can stop her, even after several times of rape she stands against the so called Bhadrlok society. She alone can barricade and

blockage to stop and disclose the system/ falsities of mahajanapantha and police law.

In this story, Mahasweta Devi shows and encourages how to act or fight to achieve one's (subaltern) rights when she or he deprives from it. Slavoj Zizek, a post modern theorist , described the reality under capitalism as the traumatic kernel. He also described the capitalist reality as the symbolic order which is devoid of the Big Other. Big Other suggest the idea of God. Thus everything is slippery, volatile, no one is ther to hold it. In *Mahabharata* , Dharma existed and Lord Krishna saved Draupadi, but in the case of Dopti, as there is no Big Other , she is forced to speak herself. She is disenfranchised, then she started to speak to correct the symbolic order of the state.

Dopti, here stand as the multiple subaltern who acts as the agency to correct the ideology of symbolic order(symbolic order) and also differentiate the idea of theory and practice. She is multiple subaltern because she is a woman and at the same time she belongs to the inferior group of people who have short economy.

RUDAALI:

Rudaali is a story of subaltern class, specially to the women. It tells the story of two women who develop a partnership for survival. Rudaali is one of the best haunting stories that comes from remote villages in Rajasthan. Sanichari is a simple and beautiful girl born in a lower caste and , poor finances , lost parents, drunken husband and mischivious son. In her old age, she was become like a stone which doesn't complain and doesn't weep. Even a sharp eye that brings artificial tears in the eyes of Rudaali cannot bring tears in her eyes.

Her mother, an old professional Rudaali ,lives with her for a couple of days but doesn't tell her that she is her mom. She suggests her to become a fellow Rudaali with her. But the problem is that Sanichari can't weep. When Sanichari's mom died, she comes to know that she is Sanichari's tears come back to her eyes after long years and becomes a famous Rudaali taking over her mother's profession.

So, in her life Sanichari gets early died father, mom after her death, alcoholic husband and mentally challenged son.

Throughout Sanichari's lifetime of misfortune she has never cried. This creates great difficulty once she is called to become a Rudaali until Bhinki, an experienced mourner, enters her life. Sanichari and the local landlord's son fall in love with each other, but Sanichari is reluctant to ask the rich lover for money as she does not want to lower her love even for the sake of getting out of poverty and misery.

So this story concerns the life of Sanichari. From the caste, she was born into being unfortunate enough to be born on unlucky Saturday, her life continues to

see tragedy and deprived from the common human laws. She sees many of her immediate family pass away leaving her in a permanent state of insecurity. But Sanichari doesn't break out, she continues to cling tightly to her dignity and this allows her to discover opportunities to allow her to support herself.

“For them, nothing has ever come easily. Throughout motherhood and widowhood they are tied to the money lender. While those people send huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to get prestige...” this quote really is central to Sanichari's story and the community where she fight for achieve the equal human rights. It is the women who are ruined by the Malik Mahajans who turn into whores. Nonsense they are a separate caste but the act of Sanichari shows how to break up all the totems and taboos of society to re-establish the common human rights.

THE BREAST GIVER:(STYNYADAYINI)

In this book Mahasweta Devi outlines women's identity as body, worker and object. In this story Devi shows female subaltern protagonist, Joshoda. Living thirteen years after India's freedom as she is compelled to take up professional motherhood, when her Brahman husband loses his feet.

Being of a subaltern woman and marries a Brahmin husband, she is deprived from all the human rights. After losing everything she cannot break down. She has the ability to hold in her 'always full' breasts and her desparate economic destitution_ she is swiftly utilized and praised for her extert weaning of wealthy offspring, which she does for 25 years, before losing her usefulness and consequently dying from breast cancer.

Dhouli:

“dhouli” is a story of redressal because it redresses the absence of the lower class. It is a story about a woman who belongs to the Dusad community and not an Elite family and raises the issue of deprivation of common human rights. Misrilal, the representative of Brahminism fell in love with Dhouli, a subaltern. For the outcome of their love Dhouli becomes pregnant. Surprisingly enough, when Misrilal hears the news he becomes very excited and assures Dhouli that he will get married with her because he is least bothered about Untouchability, but it is sheer case of hypocrisy that exposes the hypocrisy of Indian nationalism and Indian human rights. When Dhouli, the mother betrays by her lover decides to be a prostitute to lead her livelihood. She understands “*how simple to sell one's body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, maroa*”(p-28). Thus, Dhouli knows how to live. When Misrilal accuses Dhouli for becoming a kept and ask why she has still not committed suicide, Dhouli replies ‘*I tried to kill myself. But then I thought why should I? You can get married, run*

a shop, see movies with your wife and I have to kill myself. Why? Why? Why?” (p-31). So she raises a voice of protest that release her soul from all kinds of oppression. At the end of the story she goes to Ranchi in order to search her agency and defeats the societal norms and raises the issue of Buffalo Nationalism. Kancha Ilaiah in his “*Why I am Not a Hindu*” also talked about that. U.R. Anantamurty’ in his “*Sanskara*” also raises the issue of Buffalo Nationalism.

The Indian nationalism is constructed on the rigid caste system. In “*Rig-Veda*” there is a chapter known as ‘*Purushssukta*’ where it is said that Brahmin comes from the mouth of Purusha or God, Kshatriya comes from the arms, Vaisha comes from thigh while the Shudra comes from the feet of God, so they serve the other three castes, but the Dalit did not belong to the ‘*Chaturvarna schema*’ and that is why they are known as panchama and Untouchable. So, in this paper I would like to expose the hypocrisy of Indian Nationalism and hypocrisy of human rights where the upper caste always try to explore their supremacy to the lower caste and the same is the case with Dhoulis. As she is a dalit so she faces a lot of dalit predicaments. They are oppressed among the oppressed. Their life is full of sufferings and miseries. If India is the so-called democratic country and when there are certain basic inherent rights to all human being then why is the discrimination between the upper caste and the lower caste? So, the question arises is the dalit are not human being to possess human right or they did not have any right at all? Dalit are victim of human right violation. They are deprived of their rights over land, right to access drinking water, right to education, cultural rights. In “*Dhoulis*” it is seen that both the state and society through their hegemonic brutality attempted to annihilate the life and existence of Dhoulis. According to Gangadhar Patawane “*Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution*” (cited by Das and Massey). At the end of the story Dhoulis becomes a symbol of change and revolution in subaltern society.

The story of Dhoulis, who is a victim of exploitation. She is subalternized castewise and genderwise. The upper caste men always look after the lower caste women as an object with whom they can do whatever they want. The lower caste women used to gratify the lust of the upper caste men. In “*Sanskara*” Sripati has an illegal relation with Belli to gratify his lust. Physical exploitation of tribal women become a trend in Taharr and Dhoulis becomes a victim of that. When Misrilal informs his mother that Dhoulis is carrying his child she replies “*So what? The men of our family have planted their seed in so many Dusad and Ganju girls*” (p-13).

The story of dhoulis can also be studied from Marxist point of view. Marx says that the production system is utilizing the the potential of the individual as a

labour. The operability of production system is premised on false consciousness. Once a dead labour breaks away from the trap of false consciousness then the dead labour becomes a living labour. Dhoulis at the end of the story can be called a living labour. Marx says any product has three types of values—use value, exchange value, surplus value. Dhoulis gives birth to a child which is known as use value and in exchange of her body she gets corn, maro which is known as exchange value and as a prostitute when she is exploited over and over it is called surplus value.

“Dhoulis” can also be read from post-colonial point of view as Dhoulis is colonized while the upper caste is presented as colonizer. Bhabha’s notion of ‘nation and narration’ is also found in “Dhoulis” because narration is a political concept and the upper caste composes the narration for his benefit and thus the liminal and peripheral can be silenced under the rubric of the nation, but in “Dhoulis” the assertion of black identity is distinctively portrayed.

CONCLUSION:

The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read

“The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as apious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” _Gayitry Chakroborty Spvak.

Thus asserts Gayatri Spivak in her essay “*Can the Subalterns Speak?*” According to the general thrust of Spivak’s argument in this essay, her final assertion that the “*subaltern cannot speak*” denies the gendered subaltern the ability to represent herself and achieve voice agency. Spivak’s contention that “*the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read*” also precludes the possibility of others re-presenting the subaltern woman save as a blank or empty space. Hence the “circumscribed task” Spivak envisions for the female intellectual is to merely foreground the “space” or “absence” that according to Spivak, is the subaltern woman in discourse—Colonial, Western or Native Elite. This presentation of the gendered subaltern as completely inaccessible, and more crucially, incapable of agency or resistance leads to a problematic conclusion: colonialism in collusion with (native) patriarchy effected a complete “erasure” of the (subaltern) woman. This is however a clearly untenable proposition. The 1889 description of the plight of the Hindu widow written by a widow and a potential sati herself, as Ania Loomba points out, is testimony to the fact that subaltern women, such as the figure of sati that Spivak alludes to, did in fact “speak” (1998:237). I would therefore like to argue that the subaltern woman

can be re-presented in imaginative writing and further, that she can be portrayed as an “agent” particularly at certain specific historical junctures.

The depiction of the gendered subaltern as “*an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness*” (Moore Gilbert 1997:102) is problematic on several counts. As Bart Moore Gilbert demonstrates “*the more the subaltern is seen as wholly other, the more Spivak seems to construct the subaltern’s identity neither relationally nor differentially, but in essentialist terms*” (1997:102). Ironically, through this representation she replicates a failure of the Subaltern Studies Scholars for which she critiqued them: the failure to consider the subaltern in relation to the other social groups around them. Further, Spivak’s presentation of the gendered subaltern creates a complete victim and in turn makes the oppressor an all-powerful force. A conception of the subaltern woman as “*an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness,*” also implies a notion of identity as fixed and unchangeable.

Both the four text show that the multiple subaltern Draupadi, Dhuoli, Joshoda and Sanichari experience the deprivation from their common human rights for being subaltern within the context of the historical juncture of the historical interregnum, but they have not break down, instead of breaking down they act as weapon against the illogical acts. Both the four figures are involved in a social movement- Draupadi or Dopti in Naxal Bari Movement in 1970s, Dhoulis is against the upper class’s totems and taboos, Sanichari in her common livelihood and Joshada in earning money by labour and in this way they themselves present as strong subaltern women from the outset, and emerge as agents who can empowered themselves and establish their own human rights. So my argument is that the literary works composed by Mahasweta Devi are not only the representation of subaltern society, their problems and their needs but also the show the way of how to achieve the common human rights.

REFERENCES:

- 1) ‘Can The Subaltern Speak?’- Gayitry Chakroborty Spivak: Seagull 2002
- 2) ‘Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory’- P.K. Nayar: Pearson 2010
- 3) Spivak, Chakravorty Gayitri. Breast Stories.Kolkata: Seagull 2002
- 4) Devi Mahasweta, ‘Draupadi’ :In ‘In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics’ edt. and translated by Gayitry Chakravorty spivak. New York/ London: Routledge.1988.
- 5) ‘Human Rights, Gender and Environment’- Swapan Biswal: Viva Book:2006.