

Activist Self and Literary Oeuvre: A Distinct Narrative Style of Mahasweta Devi's Select Human Rights Works

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's writings are the direct offshoots of her long activist life and experience. Her unmitigated zeal to bring about justice for the under-privileged, a majority of whom are the tribals of India, has shaped her distinct narrative style. The present paper seeks to focus in detail Mahasweta Devi's style of narrativization in her select works like *Operation?—Bashai Tudu*, 'Draupadi' and in *Titu Mir*. Her narrative style has two broad categories. One is her direct criticism to the administrative policy of the state which is failed through the heroic resistance against the perpetrators, and the other is indirect arousal of condemnation for and rejection of the perpetrators. In both these cases, the authorial intervention and standpoint establishes Mahasweta Devi's role as a writer of Human Rights Literature. The narrative style of Human Rights Literature takes into account the position of the victims whether subjective or objective, the overall space that the characters capture within the plot and the end of the narrative whether it confirms justice or escapes from ascertaining it. Though Mahasweta Devi very often uses third person omniscient narrative technique, she brings the perpetrators of law and human rights vividly.

Keywords: Human rights, narrativization, resistance, perpetrators, justice.

Human Rights Literature is an interdisciplinary study. It embraces both human rights and literature. The literature addresses human rights violations and seeks to raise consciousness for them and human rights norms are applied to interpret literature. Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore in their 'Introduction' to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* very succinctly points out the nature of Human Rights Literature. According to them, Human Rights Literature focuses the literature interpreted through the human rights norms, the function of literature in promoting rights, the formation of the victimized being and the styles of representation in the fields of literature. Human Rights Literature is based on the inter-relationship of law and different cultural and social norms, policy and international agreements with its application and representation in literature (1-2). Human Rights Literature has developed through various modes over the centuries. Personal stories, Memoir, Testimonio and then fictions, plays, cinema and oral documents are some of its major categories. Joseph R.

Slaughter has pointed out that since 1977 when Amnesty International had been awarded with Nobel Peace Prize, the personal story came into vogue and they were used for human rights advocacy (“Rights on Paper” xi). There appeared testimonio in the mode of such personal stories. Testimonio is a multi-dimensional kind of narrative including autobiography, diary, interviews, memoir and oral history etc. Testimonios are concerned with the problem of poverty, repression, imprisonment and subalternity, etc. Joseph R. Slaughter’s observation is tenable here—“personal stories are the contemporary currency of human rights projects” (“Rights on Paper” xiii). James Dawes also mentions in the same line—“human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of story-telling” (*Human Rights in Literary Studies* 394).

Mahasweta Devi is a writer-cum-social activist. It is for her activist and journalistic purposes that she has travelled the tribal hinterlands of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and has first-hand knowledge of the tribal people’s lives—their customs, rituals and their struggle against various social injustices. Since 1980s, Mahasweta Devi has been dynamically linked with many social movements against bonded labour, feudal atrocity in rural society, state negligence of the tribal causes and forceful confiscation of agricultural lands. She admits that her writings are an extension of her social activism. She is dismayed at and angry for the fact that these tribal people are abused, inhumanly exploited, brutally tortured and unjustly deprived of the minimum provisions to continue their lives. Hence, her writings are not fancy tales, but a kind of documentary, specific to a historical time and space. She describes her aim as a writer in the Author’s Preface to her novella *Operation?-- Bashai Tudu* in the following manner—

I do not believe that any politics confined to promoting a party’s interests can replace the present social system. Forty-one years after Independence I see my countrymen without food, water and land, and reeling under debts and bonded labour. An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints is the only source of inspiration for all my writings....There is little prospect of any significant change in these things at least in my life time. Hence I have to go on writing to the best of my ability in defence of the dispossessed and the disinherited, so that I may never have the reason to feel ashamed to face myself (xxvi).

Thus, Mahasweta Devi as a writer of Human Rights Literature does not bear an objective distance to represent the various kinds of oppressions and injustices meted to the under-dogs and under-privileged people. She clarifies her ethical standpoint. Her narrativization has a distinct style. Sometimes, she shows how the rebels shows their heroic resistance and other times they are just the failures before the very powerful state-sponsored injustice and violence. But her authorial intervention is very common. Sometimes she directly criticizes the administrative policy and military personnels and other times she indirectly arouses condemnation of and rejection for them. Her narrative styles point out her sympathy for the exploited marginalized people. It establishes a close bond between the writer and the fictitious characters. Her writings are also set against a definite historical and geographical backdrop. Such historical and geographical veracity shows her detail knowledge of human rights violations.

Mahasweta Devi has pointed out that *Operation?—Bashai Tudu* was written during the first phase of the Left Front rule (1977-82) in Bengal. The novella is a testimony of Bashai’s fiery resistance of the manifold oppressions of the jotedars and moneylenders. The

incidents of the novella spans from 1970-1976. Bashai—a Santal leader leads various resistances and he is killed for four times. But, he reappears again with a new action much at the surprise and dismay of the administration. His multiple deaths and reappearance is a mythic ploy that Mahasweta Devi uses to testify that as long as the oppressions of the tribals continue, Bashai will appear. It may not be the same person but a person with the same caliber and manner. Mahasweta Devi has shown various ruling political parties and their corruptions that supported the jotedars and moneylenders during 1970-76. Bashai is found to lead for various causes concerning the agricultural labourers who are tribals and landless peasants. But, each time he is brutally killed by the police atrocity. Mahasweta Devi dints at the administrative system and its injustice to the tribals. It is the climactic kind of human rights violation when a tribal leader who fights for minimum wages fixed by the government is killed by the government itself. The word ‘operation’ in the title put with an interrogation mark reveals Mahasweta Devi’s dismay and grievance at such systematic corruption and oppression. The government has “an annual budgetary allotment of rupees six hundred thousand on operation Bashai Tudu” (*Operation 11*) Moreover, all the operations so far have been turned futile for Bashai appears again and again against injustices. As it is said—“Bashai Tudu had been killed four times in armed encounters, and after every death he had reappeared in all his glory in yet another action” (*Operation 11*).

Bashai’s Operation Banari in 1970 is the first action against Pratap Goldar. Pratap Goldar illegally holds sixteen hundred and sixty-six acres of land against the official land ceiling law. The government funds for a health center have been swindled to make a road so that Pratap’s rice and paddy can smoothly be transported (*Operation 71-72*). Apart from such illegal business, Pratap deprives the agricultural labourers of the minimum wages. But the contemporary Kisan Sabha—an organization for the welfare of agricultural labourers has decided to support the jotedars and landowners. Mahasweta Devi criticizes the Kisan Sabha for their ideological fallacy and pretensions of their real intentions. She directly writes that it is decided by common consensus that the Kisan Sabha can never abandon its obligation to protect the interests of the big and middle peasantry. Even, the honest agricultural commissioner who takes initiative to implement minimum wages for the agricultural labourers, is transferred to Delhi “as a punishment for his indiscreet and excessive zeal in trying to remedy the state of affairs at Banari” (*Operation 75*). Bashai kills Pratap at a violent uprising. The police shoots at Bashai while he crosses the river Charsha and his face is grilled by bullets. The administrative policy in transferring an honest agricultural officer and the violent punishment of the police of Bashai never goes beyond Mahasweta Devi’s criticism. Her language “indiscreet and excessive zeal in trying to remedy the state of affairs at Banari” points out how she is personally dismayed at the state policy (*Operation 75*).

Bashai is hit by multiple bullets in his stomach while he fights against Rameshwar Bhuniya in 1972. He dies at the hospital. But, Bashai appears again for another two actions—one at the Operation Bakuli against Surja Sau and another at the incidents of Kadamkhuinya in 1976 against Jagattaran Lohari. Each time he is brutally attacked by the police. Mahasweta Devi’s sharp rejection of the perpetrators of the crime and her sympathy for Bashai at the same time are explicit. She gives a lurid description of the police brutality against a Santal leader who is fighting for minimum wages and some fundamental rights of the agricultural labourers—“the victim may have his bones all broken, may have been dragged down tied to the wheels of the

van, may have his nails and eyes uprooted, his genitals torn away, an iron rod thrust into his anus, all his ribs cracked to pieces..." (*Operation 127*). Bashai is killed by a bullet—his body is riddled with bullets first time; his body is impaled and his face and abdomen torn open the second time; his bones are crushed and splintered at the third time; and he dies of gangrene the fourth time (*Operation 31*). But, neither Kali Santra, nor the police can realize how Bashai appears again and again with fresh operations. This is also a part of Mahasweta Devi's narrative style to bring about the failures of the state administration to curb down a rebel who is fighting for the rights of agricultural labourers.

Mahasweta Devi also criticizes the state administration for its obvious support to the jotedars and moneylenders. The total policy is against the deprived and marginalized people, particularly the landless Santal peasants. The Labour Commission revises the minimum wages time by time. The government appoints inspectors and officials who spend away their days in cozy office rooms. They come from higher class and have no idea about the plight of the poor peasants. The implementation of law is obstructed in the court. The government appoints officers to implement minimum wages but at the same time, gives implicit order not to do anything. Thus, the oppressions of the agricultural labourers and tribals continue. It is a pity that even the government announces to provide some relief funds to the jotedars. A high-powered committee at Kolkata decides that Jagattaran—a jotedar "should be granted a compensation of a few lakhs of rupees immediately to enable him to set up palm jaggery industry, the funds to be made available from the department of small scale and cottage industries or from the unutilized allocations for the purchase of fishing trolleys" (*Operation 159*). The compensation will be given because he will not be allowed to keep bonded labours.

Mahasweta Devi's short story, 'Draupadi' is located within the peasant uprising which, later on, took the form of Naxalite movement against the upper-class landlords, moneylenders, and the jotedars. The protagonist of the story, Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman, is a 'veteran fighter' (*Breast Stories 34*) with her indomitable courage, unmitigated tenacity, and skilled knowledge of guerrilla-warfare. Her heroic exploits as a field-hand as well as her protest with raped and naked body against the rapist armies blur the normative femininity which sanctions shame and fear of a raped victim. Her body considered as a site for state and male violence in the form of gang rape by the army officers, turns out to be a powerful tool to attack the male chauvinists. Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' shows how a male chauvinist state applies 'rape' as an exemplary punishment for the women rebels. But, Draupadi's sharp rejection of the rhetoric of rape that arouses shame and fear fails the powerful male chauvinist state administration at the same time.

In criminal diary, twenty-seven years old Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen is the most wanted being because both Draupadi and her husband, Dulna murdered the landlords Surja Sahu and his son, occupied the upper-class wells and tube wells at the time of drought and escaped from Bakuli pretending, as if, dead among the corpses. After the murder of her husband, Dulna, in police encounter, she became the leader of the tribals and in the wild forest of Jharkhani region, she ran her opposition struggle. All moneylenders, landlords, grain brokers, anonymous brothel keepers, police-informers are terrified by Dopdi. Her single-minded determination comes out in a conversation with Mushai Tudu, a sympathizer of Dopdi—"...how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will *kounter* me. Let them" (*BS 28*). Her fiery-

spirited determination and virility are writ large in her words, when hearing a footstep following her, she observes—“You fucking jackal of a cop, deadly afraid of death, you can’t run around in the forest. I’d run you out of breath, throw you in a ditch, and finish you off” (BS 32). Her resilience and terrible courage¹ make the Senanayak, the chief army commander in Jharkhani operation, thoroughly dismayed.

Dopdi was arrested and was consequently gang raped both in the army camp and in the police custody following the euphemistic order of the Senanayak—“*Make her. Do the needful...*” (BS 35). It was the most vehement punishment by the representatives of the law.² Senanayak himself could not clearly utter the act that he had sanctioned. Mahasweta Devi arouses a kind of condemnation of such utterly unjust act through nature. She writes how the unconscious Dopdi is gangraped again and again while moon vomits its light in the sky. The ‘vomiting’ of moon is against the traditional romantic attachment with the moonlit night. This is an instance of inactive arousal of condemnation for the perpetrators. In ‘Draupadi’, Mahasweta represents the state itself as a gendered institution that gives its male officers their patriarchal authority. The masculinity of both Senanayak and Arjan Sing are derived from such an institutional arrangement.³ Thus Mahasweta writes—“Arjan Sing’s power also explodes out of the male organ of a gun” (BS 21) and then, the brutal rape of Dopdi is metaphorically hinted as “Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over” her body (BS 36). But, the regressive state law which the male officers tried to keep intact through a brutal rape had been challenged by Dopdi’s apparent disobedience to surrender. The rhetoric of rape only sanctions shame and fear of the victim, by which she could be controlled, subordinated in a patriarchal society. But, Dopdi did not act according to normal femininity. She refused the obedient, shame-ridden femininity that was scripted for her (Misri 607). When the guard pushed the water pot forward for her, she poured down the water on the ground, tore her piece of cloth with her teeth. The guard could not comprehend such crazy behaviour of a prisoner, and ran for further order from the superiors. The Senanyak came out and was about to cry to see Draupadi walking naked “in the bright sunlight with her head high” (BS 36). She curtly asked Senanayak—“You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me?” (BS 37) He could not understand her wry laughter which was a vengeful rejection of all superficial honour these upper-class army officers were used to enjoying. The puzzled guard and the Senanayak turned to be passive, timid, out of their wits, while, on the contrary, Dopdi appeared to be daringly active in her opposition. Wiping blood from her ravaged lips, in a “terrifying, sky-splitting and sharp voice” (BS 37) she asked—“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (BS 37) According to Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Dopdi’s refusal to wear clothes is — “...simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system [pertaining to nakedness and rape] and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create the disconcerting counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy” (qtd. in Sen and Yadav 244). She pushed Senanayak “with her two mangled breasts” and for the first time, he was afraid to stand before “an unarmed target” (BS 37).

Dopdi violated the patriarchal assumptions of a raped object outright and emerged as an autonomous subject reversing the subject-object equation.⁴ Her walking with her head erect and her question ‘Are you a man?’ starkly hint at the ignoble patriarchy that valorizes male superiority. As a tribal and then as a woman, she peeled off the false veneer of upper-class patriarchal norms that unambiguously marginalize tribal women. Her body was inhumanly used

for transcription of male governed state violence, but she remained naked at her own insistence and used her wounded body as a weapon to terrify the armed officials. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, in her article “The Story of Draupadi’s Disrobing: Meaning of Our Times”, says—“Sexual molestation of any form happens to be patriarchy’s method of social control rather than a pathology of sexual violence as such.” (qtd. in Sen and Yadav 244). In heterosexual paradigm, rape is a brutal means of controlling female sexuality. The custodial rape of Dopdi was not only a violation of human rights but also a sheer injustice to a female political prisoner. The Senanayak’s command to make her, following which the cruel sexual assault of Dopdi continued, was to control her sexuality and it was a message to the rebel tribal women that the state not only ignored their life and respect, but also legitimized such atrocity to quell down any tribal uprising. Hence, Dopdi’s daring attack with her wounded body was an affront to the practitioners of law, who behaved according to patriarchal ideologies.

Mahasweta Devi’s novella *Titu Mir* is also a testimony of Mahasweta Devi’s narrative style that points out her concern for human rights. The novella deals with Titu Mir’s fierce battle against the zamindars, indigo planters and the British army. He inspires the people and raises his action areas around Hyderpur, Narkelberia etc. He finds support of the farmers, weavers, potters irrespective of religions who are exploited by the zamindars. The East India Company takes Titu Mir as a violent agitator and a threat because his actions jeopardize the revenue collection. His mujahids sharply defeats Davis—a notorious planter and kills Debnath Ray—the zamindar of Gobra Gobindopur, who assists the stave men of Davis.

A formidable British army approaches to attack the bamboo fort at Narkelberia on 19th November, 1831. There are Barasat’s Joint Magistrate Alexander, Captain Sutherland commanding the cavalry charge, Major Scott with a full regiment of infantrymen, and Lieutenant McDonald with a section of artillery and two guns. The fight with guns and bayonets with staves, green wild apples, bricks and swords cannot match. The warriors heroically fight against the British. But, the whole bamboo fort is set fire and a surge of people come with their antic weapons against the British. Most of the mujahids are killed. Some others are imprisoned. Titu is killed and his body is burnt in the funeral pyre of the bamboo fort. The British army kills even the innocent persons in the villages to curb the rebellion.

The British army wins the battle but they are demoralized to kill the people who fight for their rights. Alexander, Barasat’s Joint Magistrate admits that even the dead body or part of a dead body of Titu Mir is dangerous. He orders:

Take up the bodies of Titu Mir and all the dead mujahids and put them in the fort. Then set fire to it. Make sure that every bit of it burns....If we do not burn his body, Titu Mir will not be totally destroyed. If his followers get hold of his dead body they will start another rebellion. Even his corpse is dangerous (*Titu Mir* 111).

But, Alexander is totally confused. He is dumbfounded to decide “whether this was the end, or the beginning, or merely one chapter in an unending history”. He looks at Titu Mir’s dead body and finds “a faint, unsullied smile” on the face (*Titu Mir* 111). This smile of Titu Mir, even at his defeat is symbolic of their resilient spirit, tenacity, and unending opposition against the inhuman practice of zamindars, moneylenders, and planters.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi's personal sympathy for the deprived and marginalized beings and steadfast zeal to bring about justice are explicitly found in her narrative style in which she as a writer intervenes into the narrative and makes her authorial comments. She does not take an objective stance or maintain an objective distance as such. Mahasweta Devi as a person and as a writer are not different. Her social activist zeal prompted her to write in the sphere of literature not any fictitious tales but a kind of realistic writings that vociferously point out her protest against all injustices. The writer of Human Rights Literature, particularly who have written fictions like J.M. Coetzee (*Disgrace, Waiting for the Barbarians*), Dave Eggers (*What Is What*), Edwidge Danticat (*The Farming of Bones*), Omar Rivabella (*Requiem for a Woman's Soul*), Achmat Dangor (*Bitter Fruit*) are not found to carry out such distinct narrativization that Mahasweta Devi very successfully applies. Her literary outputs are not much different from her writings as a social activist. Even, the marginalized beings are not the objective character. Rather, they bear a subjective position with their characteristic tenacity, determination and resistance. In the space of narrative Bashai, Dopdi and Titu Mir, for example, take their subjective position.

Notes

¹ Mahasweta Devi in conversation with Gabrielle Collu in *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. ed. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav. P. 226

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 'Translator's Foreward' in *Breast Storis*. P. 7-8

³ Deepti Misri. "Are You Man?": Performing Naked Protests in India" P. 605-606

⁴ Rekha. 'The Poetics and Politics of Space: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Subaltern Stories'. P. 155

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