

Crusading for A Place in History: A Historicist Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Selected Fiction

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Ever since the dawn of critical enquiry, the claims of history and writers of history(ies) had been held under suspension, in favour of alternative truth(s). In the poststructuralist milieu one barely zeroes in on one truth or the absolute truth, but writers like Mahasweta Devi, continually ascertain the claim to 'unwrite' the existing history(ies), and rewrite one. She attempts to write the history of those individuals whose existence itself was a hearsay for writers at large and the writers of history(ies) in particular. When Devi took to writing, writing of individuals from the marginal lot was a rare phenomenon. National narratives were held in glory. It took her indomitable spirit and a fighter's instinct to write for the tribals. All of her narratives are directed towards the most important claim and right of the tribals – to be in history, to have history and to write history.

Devi's self-declared agenda of writing by itself is an activism to discover history and question oppression:

A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him

I desire a transformation of the present social system..... After thirty one years of independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. Anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing.... Hence I go on writing to the best of my ability about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame" ("Introduction", *Five Plays*, viii-ix)

Mahasweta Devi defines literature as a ‘responsible’ act that originates from the historical commitments of the writer. These commitments necessitate literature to be written to achieve the transformation of the unjust social system. Devi’s concerns obviously align her with the subaltern and their existential dilemmas. She believes that literature is recuperative as it involves the vision of the liberation subaltern from the abyss of silence and misery. The final aim of her recuperation is the insertion of the subaltern voice, their experience and emotions into the mainstream expressions especially literature. Writing to her is a creative act and a bold attempt that helps her transcend the “sense of shame or guilt”.

The greatest predicament and achievement of Mahasweta Devi as a writer is to document the lives of the tribals, whose lives have been denied, neglected and forgotten. In her observations on the indigenous lives of the tribals she found their lives to be vital and indomitable; she also felt sorry for the intangible nature of their cult, that it’s so difficult to organize them into a textual document with a beginning, development and end. Mahasweta Devi in her interview with Gayatri Spivak states:

Their history is like a big flowing river going somewhere, not without a destination... the tribal world is like a continent handed over to us, and we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it. It’s very difficult to reknit that entire experience without knowing what their potentiality was, how much they had to give. We did not respect them. (*Chotta Mundi and His Arrow* x)

One could obviously observe the nature of a flowing river in Devi’s narrative of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The hero Chotti Munda is named after the river by the hills. Despite the flowing, open-ended nature of the lives of the tribals, Devi reaffirms the possibility and the desperate need to document the lives of the tribes: “I have to document it, these things will vanish” (Ibid xii)

Devi feels the lack of resistance against cultural invasion on the side of the tribals and the failure of the Indian historiographers to find ways and means to explore the world of the tribes and document their lives as histories, are the two major reasons among others for the metamorphosis the tribal world is going through (not to mention the political intervention at the national level and globalization at the world level). “these people had no resistance against cultural invasion that took place. It is cultural, it is economic, it is connected with the land, with everything, they want to rob the tribal of everything” (Ibid xii)

The legitimacy of Devi's enthusiasm is indeed well demonstrated by her life-long dedication towards knowing and loving that population in the Eastern part of India and that authorizes and authenticates her claims on and for the tribals. "If we have to know more about the tribals we have to go back in tradition, in oral tradition, re-read something that is not written, or written in human beings, generation after generation." (Ibid xiii)

Devi suggests an alternate history that reveals the folk culture and tradition of the subaltern. She builds her narratives out of the folk – the subaltern – the tribal lives. Despite her apprehension about the tribal tradition getting wiped off from Indian memory by cultural intrusions and economic exploitation, Devi leaves all her works with a spark of hope at the end. She firmly believes in the indomitable spirit of the tribals, hence all of her works are based on the lives of heroic men and women. Fighting against the odds they try to make the ends meet; in the absence of written tradition and scripts, the tribals record their lives in songs: "Everything becomes story in Chotti's life. Story and song. The Mundari language has no writable script. So the Mundas tie everything up in story and song. There's unending suffering and deception in their lives. So they forget it for an instant as sing Chotti's song". (Ibid 106)

The folk narratives of the tribals grow out of the understanding of life where the norms of the community are privileged over the individual self-assertion. Devi recreates and rejuvenates the history of the tribal heroes who have boldly fought against the discrimination and injustice caused to the tribals. Chotti Munda is one of the most assertive heroes of Devi's fiction. The Mundas proclaim Chotti's glory through the medium of songs. The songs attributed to Chotti, is a sign of pride and declaration of success not only celebrating the individuals victory but of the community, it is the astounding proclamation of the suppressed and their success over their suppressors.

Ye took away t' land of half right half – crop,

Sent our golden boy Harmu to je-hell

Who talks to th' arrer at home?

Chotti Munda talks t' talk –

The arrer swims thr' th 'air

Now all seem crazed and crazy

Else why is Bidur Mahato t' vote-winner?

Why does Govind Karan run away?

Why do dacoits fall on yer estate?

Hey hey hey what's happenin' to ye? (*Chotti Munta and His Arrow*, 145)

On another occasion Chotti's adventure is composed into a song where he encounters the police official who had enforced restriction for Chotti to participate in the game of the boar. This even becomes a matter of his achievements and his supernatural quality. In the words of the song the boar becomes a moving mountain, and what is most interesting is that, Chotti gets a new weapon:

Ye picked a blade of grass

Grass became spear

Ye pierced t' boar

He died right away

And Daroga?

He said, Go ye brave man

Join all games

I was punished in this way

Cos I banned yer play (Ibid 82)

The folk songs assimilate the past, present and future of the unheard stories of the tribal life. It serves to be the remedial reminiscence knitted with their unnoticed talks and unaccomplished dreams. Chotti was able to reconcile the loss of Dhani, his mentor through songs composed on him. Dhani comes back to Chotti Munda, "becoming song and story".

...of Earth Father's body

I'll call y'all in one voice with him

An! On sailrakab stone now flowers bloom

Ye are those flowers. (Ibid 20)

The exclusiveness of the folk narrative is its unique expressive idiom, which is conveyed through a plain, raw, passionate language of emotions, indeed, makes the plea for history valid and a possibility. Even while it is subjected to the severest of oppressions, the language of the

subaltern is informed by a rhythmic, lyrical quality. Devi captures it all in the language of the subaltern and records it as language of resistance.

All the upheavals of the subalterns have been founded upon taking up one's disability as a weapon against oppression, like the lack of literary tradition has left the tribes with a vital oral tradition in the form of songs, stories and festivals. They are ordinary people with extraordinary characteristics.

Devi rewrites the tribal history with ordinary people. Her writing encompasses the language of the ordinary people with new sounds and words of colloquialism eventually exploding with resistance.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Devi depicts the sufferings of the tribals. After Indian independence the conditions of the tribal remains a slavish or even worse than before, the glory of independence has got nothing to do with the tribals. Devi wrote all her novels based on her life experience with the tribals. She visited the tribal regions and witnessed the horrors committed to them in the guise of national development. She observed the criminalization of politics that let hell break loose in the tribal belts. Earlier, there was the rebellion of Birsa Munda, from 1895 to 1900. Even before that, there had been many tribal rebellions. Devi in *Chotti Munda* found that Birsa Munda's uprising did not die with Birsa, it continued with Dhani, who wanted to hand over the magic arrow to Chotti Munda. The magic not in the narrow sense, the arrow of Chotti stands a symbol of the continuity of the rebellion. Chotti Munda is the emblem of that continual struggle and a symbol or representation of tribal aspiration and resistance.

Govind Nihalani, a film maker of Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1086)* makes a comment on Mahasweta Devi as, "through her writing, you get to hear the voice of a community that is otherwise voiceless" (*Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspective* 122) If through her writings, she re-knits history, folklore and legend, the purpose of her narrative is to assimilate the progressive and radical aspects of people's movements and return to the domain of the people where the legacy rightfully belongs. Kalsantra in *Bashai Tudu* becomes the narrative sieve through which percolates the debates that ravaged the communist parties in the post independent era. More than Bashai Tudu who seems to be continually dying and resurrecting in different ways and different incidents as he takes charge of action against the landlords, money lenders and exploiters of the poor tribals and assumes a mythic dimension, it is Kalsantra who remains a vital link between the teller of the tale and the reader, as he is the only reliable witness who is closely associated with Bashai Tudi and has been called by the police to identify Bashai's corpse, every

time someone dies. Each time Kalisantra identifies the corpse as Bashai and even the Sandals – “two hundred and fifty one people identified Bashai’s dead body between seven in the morning and seven in the evening” (*Bashai Tudu*, 98). Devi makes his reappearance a magical one, as the never-ending episodes of Bashai’s would suggest the continual revolt against inequality and injustice. Kalisantra as an activist of the communist party was victimized to the insensitive party machinery but still believe in the potential of resistance movement and dreamt in the vision of social change. Kalisantra struck by the “shame of the waste and the weight of a frustrated, futile and felled life that oppressed his heart” (Ibid, 146) falls down on a mound of earth where again Bashai is assumed to have been buried. As he fell asleep his body “remained tense for a while before it released and surrendered” (Ibid, 148) and he dies with the hope of finding the ‘Sonral’ root that Betual asked him to look for and eat to get relief from hunger and quench thirst. The eternal sleep that overcame him do not take away his dreams and the hope of finding the ‘Sonral’ roots like that of the revolutionary quest which he pledged all through his life for ushering in a socialist India. It is this dream of Bashai Tudu and Kalisantra and the vision of resistance that ignites the flame of revolution and urges the deprived to rise up – armed with nothing but the ideas of change.

The unique feature of Devi’s works lies in the hope that brings forth the urge to live, resist and fight the challenges that oppress humanity. Devi’s *Rudali* deals with a woman who overcomes poverty and exploitation by mourning at funerals. *Rudali* is all about survival of the suppressed. Sanichari in *Rudali* with her life struggle finds the tactics to live and overcome her deprived economic condition. She is able to challenge life by living life, knowing the mechanism of the survival of the fittest. Her survival by itself is the symbol of resistance against the manipulative and exploitative society that oppresses the outcaste poor. Sanichari becomes the subversive force against patriarchy and oppression. The best-known story of Devi - “Draupadi” – presents Dopdi Mejhen a victim turns a terror to the oppressor.

Each of Devi’s works is based on the life of an extraordinary tribal, who stands up for oneself as well as for the community. However, these individuals’ lives are being historicized by Devi in her works, not as excluded super humans but as ordinary people who fight a battle every day for their survival, again these battles are not projected as battles of individuals alone, rather they represent the battle of the community. This is the reason that Devi’s works open with a hint of the socio-economic condition (which is mostly one of poverty and exploitation) of the people.

Anjum Katyal who translated Devi's Rudali, says:

The implication is that the familiarity with this one life will also familiarize us with the life of a community. The individual is historicized, not highlighted to the exclusion of context. Along with this agenda of historicization runs a harsh powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. Confronting this, the author positions the issue of survival with an assertion of belief in the necessity for, and benefits of, community. (*Rudali* 3)

For this reason Katyal calls Devi's works 'anti-fiction' –

In several ways, this work is anti-fiction: the author either subverts or ignores the conventions of a 'story' (although she uses certain elements of fictional narrative to realize her agenda), thus disrupting the easy receptivity of fiction ('it's just a story after all'), and forcing her work onto the uneasy noman's land between journalism and fiction that is most challenging for a bourgeois readership to negotiate. (*Rudali* 3-4)

The individual-community bond is further emphasized by the detailing Devi follows in using language in her works, which her translators try their best to make justice to. Gayatri Spivak in her introduction to her translation of Devi's *Bashai Tudu* says that Devi's language is a 'collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals' (*Bashai Tudu* xii)

In this war against the oppressive forces, the tribals might lose, but Devi hopes, they will be remembered by the progeny that will get to read about tribals from history – their history. "His Mundari world will shrink. He doesn't want anything after all. A small village. All the locals adivasi, worshippers of God Haram. Followers of a priest, the pahan". (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 2) That is Devi's dream indeed the tribals to be left alone to live their lives as taught by nature and their ancestors, to live on their history, to be in history, to be having a place in history.

Although Devi's aspiration is to find a place for the tribals in history, she cannot help but hold on occasionally, and habitually perhaps, to myth as inbuilt in the tribal consciousness: be it Chotti Munda, Bashai Tudu, Dopdi Mejhen or Rudali; one could see them all in one, one in all, the life of one Chotti Munda overlapping onto the other. Devi's heroes are reborn in every other narrative, it looks like myth but not unlike history as the saying goes – 'history repeats itself'

Works Consulted

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