ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5th Year of Open Access

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Mahasweta Devi's *Outcast: Four Stories*: The Subaltern do Speak

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Mahasweta Devi is a distinguished Indian Bengali writer, studying and writing ceaselessly and unremittingly about the life and struggles faced by the tribal communities in a number of states like Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. She is a reputed Indian writer who was born in the year 1926 into a middle class Bengali family at Dacca, Bangladesh. She received her education from the prestigious Shantiniketan founded by the great Indian philosopher and thinker, Rabindranath Tagore. Mahasweta Devi graduated from the University of Calcutta and this was followed by an MA degree in English from the Visva Bharti University.

Even though Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak voice has gained some recognition in the Western academic space, Mahasweta Devi is not so widely known to academics outside Bengal in her own country. Mahasweta Devi, the most renowned social activist among the contemporary Bengali literary artists, penned stories to render and reveal to our gaze the charade and duplicity of the democratic set-up in our country and to give a picture of the fates of the marginalized women experiencing and undergoing untold miseries within and without their own communities.

Mahasweta Devi's *Outcast: Four Stories* powerfully and realistically presents the dismal and pitiable fate of four marginalized women characters—Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta—who are marginalized even by those who are generally considered as the marginalized in society. The writer gives a picture of a three-tier structure in the Indian social order composed of three rungs, the first of the main stream, the second of the marginalized, and the third of the outcast. Herein the writer explores and exhibits the gendered causes lying beneath the social and economic exploitation of three women belonging to a backward minority. The writer reveals the implicit slave trade that continues to prevail under the disguise of the democratic society of India, and unmistakably indicates the miserable and hopeless plight of these women who usually have nobody to turn to. The worst that can be said is these are women who are not considered as human beings and treated as commodities both within and outside of their own communities.

The first of these stories, eponymously titled "dhouli"(sic) presents the miserable and heart-rending plight of a *dusad* (untouchable, lower caste) young widow who is seduced and impregnated by Misrilal, the son of a wealthy, upper-caste Brahman named Hanumanji Misra. Misrilal does away with of the liability and accountability of the newborn child and its mother by marrying another woman belonging to his own caste and by settling in Ranchi, a distant Indian city. Under the circumstances she and her son are forced to starve for want of bread. Dhouli is compelled to sell her body in order to keep her body and soul together for her son and for herself. Misrilal returns and forces her to leave the village and move to the city to become a prostitute.

In Mahasweta Devi's second story, "shanichari,"(sic) an Oraon girl is marginalized like Dhouli in her own society for coming back with a *diku's* (upper caste's) child in her womb. A middle-aged woman, Gohuman, has sold Shanichari to a brick kiln owner in Barasat, West Bengal, where she faces economic and sexual exploitation

leading to pregnancy. Subsequently, Shanichari is sent back to her native village, but only to face social ostracism. To some extent differently, however, is the story, "the fairytale of rajabasha,"a self-imposed ostracism, not from her own society, but from the world (as she commits suicide), is the result of the love of Josmina for her husband Sarjom. Both of them are sold to a landowner in the distant Indian state of Punjab, where Josmina is meted out the same treatment as Shanichari, even though she finally manages to somehow come back home with the hope of beginning life anew. But her hope of a new life gets belied, as she develops the symptoms of motherhood, brought upon her by her master in Punjab. At last, Josmina commits suicide to keep her husband from ostracism from his own community. Although these characters and their stories seem to be unrelated, still they all remain in the same bracket as what brackets these three characters together is the label of "Otherness". It is noteworthy that this leitmotif of "Otherness" is recreated in the narrative mode of the three stories at different levels. We can see this in the very opening of "dhouli," that builds the ambience of an "Other world," the world of the subaltern where no light ever penetrates:

> The bus left Ranchi in the evening and reached Taharr around eight at night. … The world beyond and the wide, metalled road ended here. Rohtagi Company's bus was the only link between Taharr and the rest of the world. … They used poor, rundown buses for poor, rundown places like Taharr, Palani or Burudiha. The service was suspended during the rainy season as buses couldn't ply on unmetalled roads. Taharr would be completely cut off from the rest of the world during the monsoon months (1).

An air of marginalization, which increasingly gets intensified, is suggested by the use of words like "poor", "rundown buses for poor", "run down people". At a different level, the word "buses," an unambiguous symbol for modern lifestyle and civilisation, sets the character and role of the people of the "Other world", as these buses are rejected vehicles fit only for the poor or marginalized. In total dissonance from the reference to the civilized world in the opening paragraph, the concluding paragraph of "dhouli" signifies another frame of marginalization. Here Mahasweta Devi delineates the natural world and thereby ironically effects a dissolution of the nature-civilization dichotomy:

> The sun shone brightly. The sky looked blue and the trees as green as always. She realized that nature was unaffected by the upheaval in her life. This painful thought made her weep. Wasn't everything supposed to change from today? Everything? The day Dhouli was to finally enter the market place? Or is it that, for girls like Dhouli, nature accepted such a fate as only natural? The nature, which, after all, was not created by the Misras—or had the sky, the trees and the earth [been] sold out to the Misras as well? (33)

Significantly, the effacement of the nature-civilisation binary leads to a kind of identification between the two apparently dichotomous entities and suggests an ominous absorption and annihilation of nature by a soul-killing civilization. Like the world of civilization represented by the "metalled road" in the opening paragraph, at the conclusion of this short story nature remains indifferent to Dhouli's ostracism from her

own subaltern community. Mahasweta Devi, though, makes it plain through her narrative that the label of "Otherness" is conferred by the politics of power dynamics and the hegemony exercised by the upper class. In the Panchayat meeting where Dhouli's fate is sealed by the senior Misra, Dhouli is given two choices—of being burnt alive, or of adopting prostitution in an "Other world." Hanumanji pronounces, "Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burned to death" (31). It would be worthwhile and significant to note that even the tribal untouchables, the *dusads* and *ganjus*, make no protestations against his verdict. Here, the narrative delineates repression of the marginalized class, which is the product of a societal power structure born of the domination and supremacy of the dominant class. The repression and ostracism of the marginalized is the direct fallout not only of the indifference of the upper class but also of the members of the repressed community themselves.

In the story "shanichari"(sic), the writer acquaints us with the young tribal girl, Shanichari's status in the social hierarchy. Shanichari, in the company of her grandmother "enjoyed the train ride to Tohri, sitting on the floor of the compartment, chugging along, having a good time picking the lice from each other's hair" (34). This roundabout reference to Shanichari and her grandmother's subaltern status, suggested by the phrase "sitting on the floor of the compartment," is further reinforced through a seemingly innocuous folk-tale narrated in fragments by the grandmother:

> 'Don't you know the one about the carpenter who carved a girl out of wood and became her father? The weaver who gave her clothes and became her brother? The goldsmiths who gifted her jewellery and became her uncles? Didn't the sindoorwala bring her to life by giving her sindoor?' (35)

The story is reminiscent of the myth of the birth of Eve. As Eve was brought to life from Adam's rib, so too was this girl carved from wood by a man and brought to life by the *sindoor* of another man, the Sindoorwala, who finally owned her. The very opening of the short story foreshadows what fate awaits her. Thus we can assume that Shanichari will be treated as a commodity and discarded no sooner does her commoditised existence is of no use to the males in her life. This suggestion becomes even more unambiguous with the coming of Hiralal, the itinerant folk-song singer who ekes out a living by singing his songs in train compartments. Hiralal, who is endowed with an obvious choric function in the narrative, unravels Gohuman's guile and deceit in trapping young girls like Shanichari. Mahasweta Devi, by her deft use of an intimate conversational tone and sometimes a direct narrative and descriptive style, exposes Gohuman's devious ways of trapping trusting and gullible tribal girls like Shanichari. The tragic fate that tribal girls like Shanichari meet is skilfully delineated by the writer. She gives a realistic and matter-of-fact depiction of how the Indian paramilitary forces are pressed into service to subdue and crush the tribal people by burning their huts, looting and killing them, and even gang-raping their women. Mahasweta Devi discriminates between the civilized mainstream readers, who read stories on exploited tribal girls sitting at leisure in their cosy homes, from those of the "Ho-Oraon-Mundra girls" living in appalling conditions and leading despicable lives:

> The BMP [Bihar Military Police] took the young girls into the forest and raped them. Imagine the scene. Familiar to you, no doubt, from innumerable story books—the lush green forest and a group of Ho-Oraon-Mundra [three Indian tribes] girls who look as if they have been exquisitely carved out of black stone. Only the bestial howls of the BMP would have been left out of such a picture-book scene. (46)

Finally when Shanichari is driven out of her village she is compelled to head to an even more inhospitable place than her own inhospitable forests where she was born into. Starvation forces Shanichari to go to the brick kilns to face a situation worse than her earlier one. There she is provided with clothes by the owner of the brick kiln, but only to be later stripped and raped. "Rahamat would dress Shanichari in good clothes and nice jewellery, rub fragrant oil in her hair—and then tear into her ruthlessly"(51). Very soon she is replaced by another tribal girl and she began working as a *reja*. As labourer she is only underpaid and exploited, and later when impregnated by the owner of the brick kiln, Shanichari returns eventually to her people only to discover that she is an outcast in her own lower-caste community. This marginalization of Shanichari—her marginalization by the marginalized—is efficiently and powerfully presented through the dialogue between the brother of her murdered lover, Chand Tirkey, and the *naiga*, the village head-priest:

> "We should think about this as a community. There could be more Shanicharis in the future. Should we cast out our own women? Will that benefit our society?" The *naiga* said, "We'll think about it if it happens again. Not now. This is a new problem" (54).

In "the fairytale of rajabasha," Mahasweta Devi, besides providing a realistic and striking depiction of the exploitation of Sarjom and Josmina, a tribal couple, projects certain instinctive reactions of the tribal people living below the poverty line, and finally records the behavioural patterns of the well-off people belonging to the mainstream. The story opens with the description of an arrangement of a tribal feast on the occasion of the marriage ceremony of Sarjom and Josmina, and we hear Sura Jonko saying: "Not just turmeric and salt, let's cook it [the meat] with onions, pepper and other spices" and the narrator voices their unuttered sentiment: "Great fun, great food" (57). Even in the midst of such deprivation and poverty the couple are very excited and happy:

> Josmina collected roots and tubers from the forest. Living off just these and *ghato* made of *makai*, she looked gorgeous. A new mother, the curves of Josmina's body filled out like the gushing Koyena in the months of rain. There was much happiness and peace in this first chapter of the fairytale of Rajabasha (59).

Afterwards, following the tragic upheaval in the lives of the couple caused by their moving to Punjab as slaves, when they return to their village, Mahasweta Devi tells us the minimum that a subaltern requires:

> Within no time everything became as it was before. It was so refreshing to bathe in the waters of the Koyena. So peaceful to boil some *makai* at the end of the day and cook *ghato* in the evening. To sprinkle salt on it and eat off leaf plates. So pleasant to sit by the banks of the river, washing pots and pans while chatting to girls you've known all your life (78).

In contrast to the happiness of the couple even in the midst of their poverty, Mahasweta Devi's presentation of Nandlal Sahu's unhappiness amidst affluence is revealing: "He had two fine houses in the districts of Monoharpur and Raikera. And two wives [in contrast to Sarjom's one hut and one wife] in those two houses. Now his first wife, who lived in Rajabasha, waspestering him for a pucca brick house"(59). So to fulfil the desire of his first wife, Nandlal sold Josmina and Sarjom to an "adarsh kisan of Punjab."

Mahasweta Devi shows that the crux of the problem of the marginalized lies in the characteristic power dynamics of the master-slave relationship between the village feudal upper caste and the lower class wherein the former treat the latter a commodity and an instrument of labour, akin to bonded labour. That is why, while buying the couple, the Punjabi agriculturalist, Niranjan Singh**,** "pinched Sarjom's arm and shoulder muscles," and a little later when Josmina, "gaping open-mouthed at everything around her, put a nipple to the child's mouth," Niranjan mused: "Feed her for a week and these goods will be just right."(66) Throughout the story, Mahasweta suggests that these subaltern people are nothing but "maal," "goods," commodities, "junglee jaanwars",forest animals, to those at the top of the social hierarchy: "To Niranjan, she [Josmina] was just fresh meat; dark, *junglee* [savage] flesh which he had paid for. They bought it all up, everything. Everything that belonged to the Josminas"(72). Accordingly, the master treated them as he pleased, subjecting them to sixteen to eighteen hours labour, stripping and abusing the wife in front of her child, and putting them under lock and key at night: "It was his [the master's accomplice, Harchand's,] job to keep the buffaloes, cows and bonded labour under lock and key" (68). Somehow when she gains freedom from this slavery, her new-found freedom is short-lived. Back at their tribal village their hopes of happiness are shattered when Josmina come to realize that she is carrying the child of the Punjabi, his former owner who had raped her. she was shokcked as she knew that her own tribal community would never forgive this, and further that both she and her husband would be socially ostracized, Josmina, in utter desperation drowns herself in the Koyena river.

One way to look at these short stories of Mahasweta Devi is to read them as the voiced articulations of the tribal "Others" in contemporary Indian society. Gayatri Spivak's question as to whether the subaltern can speak, after reading Mahasweta Devi we can say with full conviction that the Subaltern do speak. It is worth noting that Mahasweta Devi speaks not only about the marginalized, but, far more importantly, about the marginalized within the communities of the marginalized.

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