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## Power and its Perversion in *Mahesh*

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### **Abstract:**

The following is a critical overview of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's short story *Mahesh* focusing on how power is exercised to its base ends. The story represents a vivid picture of rural Bengal society in the time around 1920s under colonial set-up and how people like Gophur, Mahesh and Amina fought and did not yield into the submission of power. The story shows the chasm-like-gap in dialogues in which poor hapless people find themselves trapped at the end of it. In fact they do not even know that they are getting themselves into trouble. There is no surreal rescue; no escape; but there remains an unrelenting hope for a future.

### **Keywords: Power, Subversion, Colonialism, Dialogism, Jouissance.**

Sarat Chandra's most works represent rural Bengal society, where the marginalized are oppressed by power, and an intrepid championing of their courage to defy it. The short story *Mahesh* has certainly helped Sarat Chandra find a place in the hall of fame of Indian short story writers. But it is only one of those gems that he leaves behind in the form of *Boro Didi*, *Mandir*, *Ramer Sumati*, *Andhare Alo* and so on. No one can describe how beautifully crafted the stories are, when it is something to be experienced over time. In his short stories Sarat Chandra presents an understanding of reality - the socio-economic deprivation as well as the exploitation of the poor. However, the picture of Indian society of 1920s is very vivid in *Mahesh*.

With the protagonist *Mahesh* in focus, the short story *Mahesh* tells the tragic story of not so very wide range of characters situated in a complex social as well as rural reality which is filtered through a progressive consciousness and yet committed to an authentic portrayal. The story consists of a tale of Gophur Mian and his bull *Mahesh* who is eventually killed. But his vulnerable death questions the very alter of power. Gophur with his family consisting of his stoic daughter *Amina* and his old but at the same time shockingly assertive and rebellious bull *Mahesh* go through the ups and downs of the debt ridden colonial existence that any peasant goes through in India. They are starved yet optimistic, unlettered yet experienced, unsophisticated yet know the ways of the world. As the story unfolds Sarat Chandra takes his readers through the clash between Gophur, a peasant in *Kasheepur* village and *Tarkaratna*, one of *zemindar's* men. Here

Tarkaratna called Gophur an “Atheist” and “Savage” for tying his bull in the sun all day long and not giving him anything to eat. However, Gophur gives the reason for it, he says he has been ill for quite a few days. There is no straw in his house and he does not have the strength to take Mahesh to graze. So, he asks something from Tarkaratna as a debt to feed his bull but he refuses to give it as Gophur does not have the means to repay. Ironically enough, the means was blocked by those very men who demand it – the zemindar and his working hands. Peasants like Gophur are always mysteriously trapped in a vicious circle of inescapable and ever-increasing debt, so much so that they do not even have the food to eat and to feed their pets. People who are in position of power in society depend wholly on their subject, live a parasitic life; but in time of their need, nobody pays heed to them, not even steps foot on their shadow, for that would defile their caste and religion. So, Tarkaratna is afraid of being touched by Gophur, as he is an “untouchable”.

The caste system is also at work in Mahesh. It has many obligations: violating any rule of Zemindary system could cause excommunication, as Tarkaratna in the story enlightens everyone who are present in zemindar’s court. According to him, a person like Gophur, who tries to sell his bull while being a subject of a Brahmin zemindar, should be excommunicated to a place miles away from the very boundary of village. Gophur does not have the right to sell his bull as he lives under the rule of Brahmin zemindar. These people seem to be always at the end of the queue, whenever there is anything to get: There is an instance in the story, when Amina goes to fetch water for his father who has been earlier beaten by zemindar’s men for Mahesh. There Sarat Chandra describes how a low caste girl like Amina manages to bring water. She is not allowed to Shibcharanbabu’s pond, the only pond which has water in the entire village and the rest of the reservoirs of water is dried up of heat. Though people dig deep in some places to manage a little water, but Amina being an untouchable cannot get near to them. She has to wait long until someone kind pours a little water in her pot. Someday she finds herself fortunate and someday not so – such is the misery.

In Sarat Chandra’s short story Mahesh it is Mahesh who problematizes the Zemindary system by his unconventional and unorthodox way of protest. He cannot speak, perhaps there is no need of it, but he can act and his action speaks louder than words: he can spoil the vegetable plants in zemindar’s garden, he can even gore when it is needed. This is what is needed in a corrupt blood-sucking colonial system – a protest, a stand against anarchy. He, being a bull does something which humans have not been able to do in Kasheepur village. He dismantles the very constructs of law and rule. And surely he is a threat to this system, so zeminder would always want to detain and sell him, thereby perishing the main obstacle from the path, as Tarkaratna in the story orders Gophur to tie Mahesh away from his path. It is imperative for the system that a rebel like Mahesh should be tied up and kept under control, otherwise he could cause problems. The situation gets worse as the days pass by. An old Mahesh would not be any help to anyone: neither can he earn food for his family, nor he can be of any help to anybody as he has no strength. But he can protest what is wrong, so nobody wants him in this village any more. He is invalid in socio-economic power system, like a machine which has earlier given productions, but presently works no more. Gophur is left with little choice,

he has to kill his bull and his son, as he chooses to call Mahesh. A rebel like Mahesh has to die for a greater revolution to come.

In Mahesh, there is a dialogic mixture of two voices, where words occur with a loophole and go on to make something more out of their presence, as Bakhtin says in one of his own versions:

Instead of trying desperately to defend the notion that individual utterances, or texts, original meaning which it is the business of criticism to recover, we can locate meaning in the dialogic process of interaction between speaking subjects, between texts and readers, between texts and themselves. (Sue Vice 3) 1

Sarat Chandra's Mahesh refers to the ceaselessly shifting power relations in words spoken by people of authority, their sensitivity to each other and their temporary relations. Manik Ghosh, in the story, who is known for his cow worship in the village, can take Mahesh to police station, even his men threaten Gophur by saying that if he does not come to explain things and suffer humiliation, his bull would be sold out. The concept of Dialogism by Bakhtin helps readers understand how blurring of meaning occurs between words spoken by people with power and their deeds. The double voicedness of such characters makes a polyphonic meaning differing and deferring in what they say, what they actually mean and what they do, thereby multiplying the possibilities by which the entire status quo works. The peasants like Gophur are debt ridden, they never repay what they take from zemindar, only because they are never told the exact amount of their debt. This Zemindary system plays with men like gophur with their words and makes them and their generations as peasants who do not have the right to their own cultivation.

Both Gophur and Mahesh is what Kristeva says as "the abject" to the eyes of Manik Ghosh and Shibubabu. Barbara Creed writes:

The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life; it must be radically excluded from the place of living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (Creed 65) 2

Thus Gophur and his bull must be excluded as they ostensibly draw attention to the place where meaning collapses. They threaten the very process by which zemindar and his men exploit the peasants. However, according to Kristeva, the abject is separated from the subject only through an imaginary border, that means there is always the possibility that the subject would be repelled by the abject as well drawn to it. Then Kristeva describes "jouissance", a sensation akin to joyousness, a place which the subject and the abject unintentionally share. Therefore, though zemindar and his men beat Gophur and try to excommunicate them, the stoic rebellion of Gophur and Mahesh would always evolve. Whenever there is oppression and however cruel that may be, there would always be a protest.

Kristeva further points out:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts and uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. (Kristeva 15) 3

Thus, Gophur and Mahesh never give up, more importantly, Mahesh fights till his death. They may not turn the law upside down but they have always questioned it, subverted it and refused to give in to rule. Though Mahesh dies, humanity survives even in most inhumane circumstances. And there lies the hope for a better future. Now, a bigger fight awaits Gophur in Phulber, the jute-mill, a place of no religion and no honour for women. Perhaps, that would be Amina's turn to fight the war beside Gopuur.

**Notes:**

Vice Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*: Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 1997, Page 3.

Creed Barbara. *Horror And The Monstrous Feminine : An Imaginary Abjection* . London Routledge, 1993. Page 65.

Kristeva Julia. *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* . Columbia University Press, 1982. Page 15.

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