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Narrative Techniques in Mahasweta Devi's *Romtha*

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is one of India's foremost women writers. Her literary writings are shaped by her experience as a committed social activist in West Bengal. She champions the cause of the socially backward classes of the society. Devi's *Romtha* pronounced as "Ramtha" means a person who has committed heinous crime. The story narrates the pathetic state of Sharan, a young convict branded *romtha* on his chest. A hot iron is pressed into the skin at the base of the throat of a *romtha*. The aim of the paper is to analyse the narrative techniques that makes *Romtha* artistic. The story has a four way part division delineated artistically using stylistic devices, remythification technique, descriptions, story within a story technique, mixing of third person narration with dialogues and the authorial intrusion. As a creative writer, Devi employs narrative techniques to make the novelette artistic.

Keywords: socially backward, stylistic devices, remythification, authorial intrusion, artistic

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is one of India's foremost women writers. Her literary writings are shaped by her experience as a committed social activist in West Bengal. She champions the cause of the socially backward classes of the society. Her writings portray the bitter sufferings of the oppressed and the deprived classes of the tribal society. She recounts the process at work in her artistic writing in her interview with Naveen Kishore. She says, "Before I write, I think a lot, mull over it, till it forms a crystal-clear hard core in my brain. ... the story is my grip. When I write, all my readings, memories, direct experience, acquired information, come into it." (xx - xxi). She has documented in her writings " ... little known, little lauded struggles which are part of everyday life and don't necessarily find a place in history books or the main-stream media" (*Dust on the Road*, xiii). Her literary contribution includes short stories, novels, novelettes, dramas and so on.

Romtha pronounced as "Ramtha" in Bengali means a person who has committed heinous crime. Devi's *Romtha* has been translated into English by Pinaki Bhattacharya. The story narrates the

pathetic state of Sharan, a young convict branded *romtha* on his chest. A hot iron is pressed into the skin at the base of the throat of a *romtha*. Devi came across the reference to the *romtha* practice in book on social history by Durgacharan Sanyal. King Laksmansen shows enthusiasm in the dissemination of *Ayurvedha*. The *baidya* (physician) can select any *romtha* condemned for life and use him in any fitting manner for furthering the cause of medicine. The historical fact has been woven around Sharan - Subhadra and Sharan - Chandrabali love tales to bring about the social evils like the practice of branding criminals and also the sufferings of the courtesans and the widows. The story is set in the royal city of Gaur and the forest of rural Bengal. The aim of the paper is to analyse the narrative technique that makes *Romtha* artistic.

Romtha has a four way part division. The first part narrates the fertile forest, the collection of medicinal herbs of Gaur kingdom and the murder of Gaurgo. Part two elaborates the practices and the flashback of Sharan's story and the heinous crime committed by him to his lady love, Chandrabali. It also unleashes the psychological status of Sharan's plea for safety and security after being branded a *romtha*. Part three elucidates the status of Subhadra and her expectation from Sharan. The last part narrates the killing of Sharan by the villagers. The four part division delineates the story vividly.

Romtha is a story of Sharan who is in love with Chandrabali, a courtesan. Chandrabali has been held in high esteem by all including King Lakshmansen for her accomplishment in singing, speaking and painting. She happens to meet Sharan by chance and since then has been much fascinated by him. When Sharan meets her, she is middle aged. She remains so exquisite that he becomes very possessive of her. Both of them take vows of virtue.

Chandrabali's promise of virtue infuriates many people like Gopal, the Chief of the guards. Gopal has the pleasure of torturing the whores. So, when he hears Chandrabali's love for Sharan, he is inclined to torture her. Gopal's overpowering nature is known to everyone. Chandrabali does not have the courage to decline Gopal's advancement. She is equally aware of "the half-lion incarnation" (19) of Sharan and her whole being trembles with trepidation to think about the consequences of letting Gopal into her home. Sharan is also aware of the circumstances that has made Chandra to yield to Gopal. It is said ". . . as Sharan's love was fierce, so was his vengeance severe" (44). So, he strangles his beloved to death. Killing an accomplished woman like Chandrabali is so heinous a crime that Sharan is given life imprisonment. Sharan tries to kill himself but survives. The influence of the *baidyas* (physicians) increases to enormous heights during the reign of King Lakshmansen. Having a mind to encourage *Ayurveda*, the King provides the *baidyas* the necessities for surgery. He helps them obtain essential ingredients. The *baidyas* are levied subsidized rates of taxes. Tax-free lands are distributed for cultivating special shrubs, flowers and herbs. Slaves are sold at very cheap rates to work in the fields.

As a peak of these concessions, the King passes a new decree that the *baidyas* can select any prisoner sentenced to death for service and his body can be boiled to prepare *Mahamash Tel* (oil). The *tel* can only be prepared by roasting a human being alive in a cauldron of boiling oil.

The *romtha* cannot escape. Hence, he has to succumb to such a ‘barbaric death’ (16). Sharan becomes the *romtha* of Kobiraj Chandrasen, a *baidya*. Commenting on the practice of *romtha*, Vadana Gupta states, “By roasting a human being, a medicine is prepared for the benefit of mankind.” (Gupta, 118). Devi questions how the life of the *romthas* can be sacrificed in inhuman ways for the supposedly noble cause of medicine.

Chandrasen has a young widowed daughter, Subhadra. She falls madly in love with Sharan. Being a widow for twelve years, she has indulged in the grinding, crushing and pounding of ingredients for her father’s potions. Having been attracted by the youth and valour of Sharan, she wants to elope with him. As Sharan does not want to die, he accepts the clothes, a shawl, some gold and silver vessels promised by Subhadra. Sharan is waiting for a chance to escape, Subhadra wants to elope with him. In such a circumstance, Chandrasen asks Sharan and the other servant Gaurgo to collect herbs from the forest. Sharan’s hands are chained. He dashes on Gaurgo’s head with the iron chain and runs into the forest deserting Subhadra. Sharan tries to escape from the forest by ferrying in a boat. On seeing the chest with the brand of *romtha*, the boatsman runs inside the village shouting for help. The villagers come in large numbers and pelt stones at Sharan. Despite his cry for life, the furious mob beat him with their oars and sticks. Sharan dies. The King’s decree permitting the boiling of the *romthas* and Chandra’s sufferings owing to her widowhood are aspects of feudal authority over the underprivileged members in Indian society. The story is rendered artistically using stylistic devices, re-mythification, descriptions, story within a story technique, mixing of third person narration with dialogues and the authorial intrusion.

Stylistic devices such as images and similes abound in *Romtha* and they reinforce characterization. The inhabitants of Gaur dissuade Chandra’s infatuation for Sharan. Her relationship with Sharan is supposed to render her a helpless woman in her home. The “cage” image shows the impending loss of Chandra’s freedom after her love for Sharan. Next, Subhadra wonders who could have killed Gaurgo. Devi employs the “calf” image in the context. She writes, “A falling branch had once killed one of the calves.” (58). Actually, Sharan kills Gaurgo for his escape. Subhadra guesses that Gaurgo’s death can be accidental. Devi brings out Subhadra’s instant love for Sharan using “flame” image. Subhadra says, “How do I hide these flames that burn me? (8)

In addition to the images, Devi uses similes in *Romtha*. Chandrabali has love for Sharan. This makes Sharan introspect the worth of his life. He has led a life of self-gratification ignoring the well-being of his parents, neighbours and friends. “Maggots”(44) feed on dead flesh. Similarly, Sharan is interested only in himself. The maggot simile suggests Sharan’s self-centredness. “Coconut” (6) is broken by smashing it forcefully. Sharan in chain smashes Gaurgo’s head with a crack. The coconut simile suggests the force with which Sharan breaks Gaurgo’s head. Widowed Subhadra lives at her father’s. She falls madly in love with Sharan at first sight. This situation is compared to sudden flood taking away everything leaving out nothing. Subhadra’s pa-

ternal restrictions and societal conditions disappear and she becomes love lorn for Sharan. The “flood” (8) simile powerfully brings out Subhadra's sudden love for Sharan.

Sharan is sentenced to death. After killing Chandra, Sharan loses meaning in life. The prison guards torture him but he remains unmoved. A dead horse remains unmoved to flogging. Similarly, punishment does not deter Sharan in any way. The “dead horse” simile suggests that physical punishment given to Sharan by the guards has absolutely no impact on him. Sharan loses faith on humanity and escapes. Devi uses “feral beast” (49) simile to suggest Sharan's wild nature. A feral beast escapes from a farm and goes back to the forest. Sharan, an inhabitant in Mahanandi village walks through the forest for his escape. The feral beast simile suggests Sharan's transition from soft nature to wild behaviour. Dwarbashini silk worn by a princess gleams and sparkles. The twinkling of the stars seen by Subhadra is compared to “Dwarbashini silk” (58). Devi uses “moonstone” (37) and “wood nymph” (37) similes to bring out the beauty of Chandrabali. A moonstone is shiny and precious. Chandra is as beautiful and valuable as a moonstone. The wood nymph of the Greek and the Roman stories has a spirit of nature in the form of a young woman. Devi suggests Chandrabali's beauty through the “wood nymph” simile. Barahi describes Gopal's harsh nature to Chandrabali. She complains that Gopal forces young women to dance. Gopal's cruelty on young women is compared to a peacock being pierced by a hunter's arrow. The “hunter” (31) simile brings out the cruel aspect of Gopal's nature.

Subhadra promises to meet Sharan at the dilapidated shrine of Sasanka in Murshidabad. She brings Sharan clothes, shawl and costly vessels to facilitate his escape. Sharan reflects on the thought of Subhadra. Instead of being grateful to Subhadra, he has only hatred for her. The “scale of a reptile pricks other's skin” (29). Similarly, instead of reciprocating Subhadra's love, Sharan hates her. The hunter and the tiger similes in the line “... he could be more merciless a hunter, more fierce than a tiger” (37) reinforce Sharan's cruelty. A hunter kills animals heartlessly. A tiger attacks its prey fiercely. Although Sharan loves Chandra, he may turn against her and kill her. The similes suggest to the readers that Sharan will kill Chandrabali eventually.

In addition to handling images and similes separately, Devi blends them in the same line: “But the will to live burned strong in Sharan's blood and of late it had grown fiery, the flames like poison, seemed to scorch his veins.” (3). The “flame” image and “poison” simile are found in the same sentence. A *romtha* is marked for life and he has no means of escape. The flame image brings out the sudden desire in Sharan for freedom. The poison simile explains how the desire for freedom has spread to his entire system. The image and the metaphor foreshadow Sharan's escape from Mahanandi village.

Apart from the stylistic devices, Devi makes use of remythification device suggestively in her narrative. Modern writers creatively handle myths to interpret contemporary realities. Devi employs the Krishna and *Narasingha* myths to reinforce characterization. The *Krishna* myth powerfully brings out Gopal's love passion. Krishna's love for *Gopis* of *Ayarpadi* expressed in *Krishna Leela* has spiritual overtone. Gopal's love for the girls of Gaur, on the other hand, is

physical and lewd. *Krishna Leela* connotes spirituality but Gopal's love episode connotes his carnal nature and physical gratification. Devi employs *Narasingha* myth to suggest Gopal's physical prowess in wrecking doom on his opponents. *Narasingha* is half-man and half-lion incarnation of God to annihilate evil and restore peace. The God assumes a special shape to annihilate evil. By contrast, Gopal assumes physical as well as political prowess only to wreck personal vengeance. Devi employs the Krishna myth and the Narasingha myth to show Gopal's contrasted nature. Thus, Devi uses myths as part of her narrative technique to suggest characterization.

Descriptions form another aspect of Devi's narrative in *Romtha*. The descriptions include the forest, Mangal case, the medicinal practice of *Ayurveda* and the *nabanna* (an autumn harvest festival). The novelette begins with the description of the autumn afternoon in the paddy fields in Mahanandi village. There are birds, deer, butterflies and insects in the fields. The description of the forest lauds nature. The description of the Mangal case follows. Mangal kills a moneylender. He is imprisoned. His brother pretends to secure release for Mangal but only sells him to *baidya*. Mangal case is an illustration of the filial treason. *Romtha* describes the medicinal practice of *Ayurveda* in detail. A variety of herbs collected from the forest are used in the preparation of concoction. *Mahamas tel* is prepared by boiling medicinal herbs. Corals, pearls, precious stones, gold dust, powdered rhino horn are used for concocting potions. The *tel* is prepared by boiling a man in oil in a cauldron. His Majesty's royal decree permits the prisoners facing capital punishment to be boiled in oil. Only a convict free from diseases or infections is used for the preparation of *Mahamesh tel*. Elucidating the narration of *Ayurveda*, Gupta states, "*Ayurveda* . . . turns out to be a system of medicine that is intrinsically feudal and therefore anti-tribal and anti-people" (Gupta, 118). The boiling of an alive man in a cauldron heightens the cruelty perpetrated on humanity.

The narrative mode in *Romtha* includes story within a story technique also. *Romtha* describes stories connected with prostitutes. The story of Ballava, the whore, throws light on the position of the whores. Ballava cannot endure her lover's tortures anymore. She poisons him. She runs away from Gaur for fear of being roasted to death. Chandrabali is described as a whore with matchless beauty and unrivalled talents. She cannot have personal love. The story of Ballava and Chandrabali show that prostitutes are controlled and tortured by men.

Mixing of third person narration and dialogues is another narrative technique in *Romtha*. As a child, Sharan weeps over the death of his grandmother. Mother comforts him saying that his grandmother has converted herself into a twinkling star. The dialogue between Sharan and his mother is interspersed with narration thus:

"That star is your *Ayi* (grand mother). See there? She's looking at you.'

Her words had cheered him up. Finishing his morning meal of warm rice with milk and *batashas*, he had told her, 'Ma, let me go and tell the others.'

'Tell them what?'

'That *Ayi*'s now a star.'

'Tell whom?'

'My friends, They say she's dead.' (51)

The words of Sharan show his love for his dead grandmother. The mother's words comfort her son. The third person narration in between the dialogue shows the impact of mother's words on Sharan.

The ingredients necessary for the preparation of concoction are described in the third person narration. On the other hand, the boiling of human being is suggested in the dialogue between Murarisen Devsharma and King Lakshmansan:

"His (Murarisen Devsharma's) noncommittal silence baffled the king.

'Precious stones! Herbs! These are the things any king can provide!' spoke Murarisen, dismissively.

'What more do you wish from the King?'

'Human beings.'

'Human beings?' (14)

The third person narration and the dialogue between Murarisen and the King suggest the horror in boiling human beings alive in the preparation of medicine in *Ayurveda*. The King's new decree permitting the *baidyas* to use *romthas* in the preparation of *Mahamash Tel* is described in the third person thus:

"The king passed a new decree: the *baidyas* could select any prisoner who had been tried and sentenced to death. The word *romtha* would then be branded on their bodies. At the service of the *baidyas* thereafter, the *romtha* could be used by their masters in whatever manner was thought fit, to further the cause of medicine." (15)

Yet another narrative technique Devi uses in *Romtha* is the authorial voice. The authoress stops narrating the story for a while to make her own comments. She expresses her views on man's universe thus: "And in the city of Gaur, those who work hard stand by helplessly as others reap the benefits of their toil" (16). A general statement leads to her specific conclusion about the city of Gaur. Devi refers to *romtha* practice in West Bengal and expresses her strong personal disapproval against it. Her comment, "Sharan had ceased to be a man" (p.3) shows the authorial pity for Sharan. Commenting on Devi's authorial intrusion Gupta observes, "... they are spun into the narrative and sufficiently camouflaged through carefully chosen events." (Gupta, 118).

To sum up, *Romtha* describes the story of Sharan. As a creative writer, Devi employs narrative techniques to make her novelette artistic. Stylistic devices and myths interpret characters for the readers. Descriptive art brings out the practice of *Ayurveda* medicine, prostitution and *nabanna* festival. The story within the story technique enables Devi to elaborate the sufferings of the prostitute. Third person narrative technique distances the authoress from the storyline. Devi delineates the story dispassionately and objectively. The authorial intrusion mode is another narra-

tive technique Devi employs in *Romtha*. Here, Devi stops narration and voices her personal views. Devi registers her disapproval of *romtha* practice using authorial intrusion device. The narrative techniques thus make *Romtha* literary.

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