

Mahasweta Devi's *Outcast: Four Stories*: A Marxian Study

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Abstract

Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing ideology have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. Over the years, literature and ideology, both individually and in tandem, have evolved as epistemic-discursive categories. Mahasweta Devi spearheaded the movement against the industrial policy of the earlier communist party of India (Marxist) government of West Bengal. Specifically, she stridently criticized the confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural lands from the farmers by the government and ceding the land to the industrial houses at throwaway prices. This paper is an attempt to showcase how ideology undergoes an unprecedented expansion in the writings of Devi with reference to her female characters in her short story collection *Outcast: Four Stories*

Keywords: ideology, literary aesthetics, colonization, patriarchy, oppression, exploitation

Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing ideology have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors

as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose 'genius' and creative imagination enable them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit. Over the years, literature and ideology, both individually and in tandem, have evolved as epistemic-discursive categories.

Mahasweta Devi, a Padmashree award winner and social activist is a renowned Bengali writer who portrays the life of the tribal people and more specifically the marginalized characters especially women on social margins of class and caste. She has been studying and writing incessantly about the life and struggles faced by the tribal communities in the states like Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. She has wholly involved herself to work for the relief of the tribal people from these struggles. She often narrates the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising of landlords, money lenders and government officials.

Devi spearheaded the movement against the industrial policy of the earlier communist party of India (Marxist) government of West Bengal. Specifically, she stridently criticized the confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural lands from the farmers by the government and ceding the land to the industrial houses at throwaway prices. "A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history will never forgive him" (Beniwal and Vandana 84).

The endings of Devi's stories reflect another aspect of her literary aesthetics. When read on a macro level, her stories can be seen as different takes on the composite reality. Showcasing the different permutations and combinations of the same narrative trajectories, her stories seem to form a creative-critical continuum along which the different tales merge into each other,

reinforcing and sedimenting the sub-strata of her literary vision. This pattern of parallels and repetition, instead of being indicative of a narrow range of concerns, signifies the expansive fluidity of Devi's vision.

A deeper probe into the supposed commonality of her stories reveals a definite progression in the evolution of Devi's activist world-view and her solutions. The stories that initially indicated a simple, linear narrative which terminated in closed endings, evolve into ambivalent and ambiguous open-ended constructions in the more mature phase of her career. This progression reflects the phases in the development of India as a nation from a homogenous, monolithic, unilinear concept to a cacophonous, diffuse entity, incorporating tensions and collisions within its ambit. The successive progression of her characters through her narratives not only closely parallels the dynamics of India as a nation in transition, but also reflects an increasingly mature response of the subaltern towards this problem of the nation.

Devi's *Outcast* showcases four stories with women protagonists, three of whom are of adivasi descent. The stories show Devi's continuing preoccupation with the plight of the tribal people.

Rape occurs as a recurring trope that underwrites the fate of the protagonists and their disenfranchisement in post-Independence India in the first three stories. Dhouli is Dusad's daughter, and a young widow. Misrilal, a Brahmin's son, falls in love with her. Dhouli knows the fate of the women of her community who fall prey to the lust of the Brahmin family and repulses him. But Misrilal convinces her of his love and promises to marry her, saying that "the government law too sanctions our marriage" (Dhouli 12). Being so young Dhouli cannot resist him and she gets pregnant. But when Misrilal's family comes to know about it, they send Misrilal away and subject Dhouli and her mother to abject humiliation. The fate of such a woman in her community depends on the attitude of the Brahmin family. If the Brahmin family takes pity on

the victim and hands out doles, she is left in peace. Otherwise she is made an outcast and is compelled to become a whore. Dhouli holds out as long as it is possible for her, but sheer hunger drives her to become a common prostitute. This invites the wrath of the Brahmin family on Dhouli and she is driven out of the village because she has brought dishonour to them, by allowing "the door through which the lion entered" to be "visited by rats and swine!" (Dhouli 30).

Shanichari is an oraon girl from Rata whose story is told against the background of the Adijati Raksha Movement. The tribal people are displaced from their area and are compelled to migrate to Kolkata to work in the brick kilns in inhuman conditions. Shanichari resists going to Kolkata but during the movement when the BMP, CRP and BSP unleashed a reign of terror, they subject her to gang rape along with the other women and leave them in the jungle without food or clothing: "Without clothes, the girls are forced to hide in the forest...'we'll get you new clothes and take you to Kolkata to work in the brick kilns. you'll work hard, eat well, make money. Come, come!'" (Shanichari 46-47). Eventually Shanichari is compelled to seek work in the brick kiln where she is raped daily by Rahmat, the brick kiln owner. His friends, Cronies, the local goons, and even the police get their fair share of the female flesh, and of course, the cuts. The brick kiln is insulated from the world outside and there is no way escape. However, the brick kiln shuts off and Shanichari returns to the village with Rahmat's child in her womb, and is made an outcast.

The "Fairy Tale" is unbearably real. It presents another face of exploitation of the tribals. Josmina is a HO tribal. Though poor she lived a contented life in Rajabasha with her husband, Sarjom Purti. But the village money lender, Nandlal Shahu who is part of an elaborate racket for supplying cheap coolie labour to Punjab, lures them with the dream of higher wages. He sells

them off to Niranjana Singh. They have to work for eighteen hours a day. Niranjana rapes Josmina daily. Somehow, Josmina and Sarjom Puri are able to escape and take refuge with Karnal Singh. But the same story of rape and exploitation is repeated. When they finally escape and come back to Rajabasha, Josmina has a child in her womb. Fearing the inevitable ostracization she jumps into Koyena and drowns herself.

The protagonists of the stories have no protection against the harsh social structures of the society in which they live. And the conditions of the widows are still worse. They are made to lead a secluded life away from the society. Though they live in the modern world which boasts of its scientific and technological advancements and the economic growth, no government policies or schemes reach out to them even to fulfill their basic needs. Besides poverty, the women victims undergo and witness endless oppression and sexual violation. The cruel reality is that their own victimizers condemn and abuse them.

The situations depicted by Devi in the above stories are unbearably grim and are a devastating indictment of the social system that allows such injustice to perpetuate. It seems as though rape has become an inevitable fact of daily life for the tribal women who venture out of their natural habitat as they have to for their livelihood. One must remember that in the tribal society, rape is extremely rare and women enjoy a status of honour. What makes these incidents more culpable is the fact that the whole administrative machinery is complicit with it.

Devi's oeuvre subverts the grand narratives of colonization, patriarchy, caste system and class division. She depicts the fate of women who are twice colonized and victimized in the Indian social system but resists the term feminism as she proficiently displays the exploitation of the lower class and tribal men also, as her emphasis is on class and not on gender. Her work does not appear to be written by a middle class woman who empathizes with the tribals and the

adivasis and the lower classes, but, as one who has herself suffered the oppression and exploitation by the elite. She questions and re interprets the great Indian epics and myth that are used to exploit and oppress the lower strata of the society. A fearless crusader for social justice, Devi's characters rebel against the parameters of acceptability set down by the society. Told lucidly, her stories chill the bone with their stark simplicity and brutal honesty. As a journalist, she steadfastly criticizes the failure of both the state and the central government policies through the daily newspapers. Her quarterly *Bortika* raises a voice against the violence, oppression, and exploitation of the lower classes and the adivasis. Along with educating the masses, Devi's message of revolution and change, has affected the policies of the government of India but the state government has not acknowledged her fiery spirit. In short, she has used her pen as a sword to eradicate the evils of socio - economic customs and traditions. One may need several volumes to analyze and interpret the works of Devi.

Works Cited

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