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PATTERNS OF RESISTANCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S
"THE WHY-WHY GIRL", "ARJUN" AND "DRAUPADI"

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ABSTRACT

Despite fervent claims made by our lawmakers and custodians of the successful democratic setup established in the country, innumerable accounts of marginalization and subjugation of the humble sections of the society could be perceived even after years of gaining the status of an independent nation. Moreover, these sagas of the lowly, the least, and the lost were either brutally stifled by the power segments before they could be given a voice or they would fall on the deaf ears of the enthroned leaders. Under these circumstances, few conscious writers were striving to do their best to bring forward the true accounts of the trials and turbulence suffered by the humble lot by representing them in their stories. Not only that, but these writers also made their works a vehicle to represent different forms of resistance against injustice that they wanted the others to adopt to attain their emancipation. Mahasweta Devi, the proficient Bengali writer, and social activist is a prominent name in this category. The present paper is an attempt to showcase the various patterns of resistance depicted in some of the most popular short stories penned by this literary genius.

Keywords: Mahasweta, Moyna, Arjun, Shabar, Dopdi, Senanayak, Resistance.

Introduction

Amongst those Indian writers who have constantly strived to deliver sagas of the lost and lonely sections of the Indian society who have been continuously bearing the tortures perpetrated by the privileged lot, one prominent name that shines out is that of the brilliant author cum social activist, Mahasweta Devi. She is counted among those true lovers of humanity, who have never shied away from unveiling any undesirable practice or act committed in the name of the social or religious norms and creating a scar on the face of civilization. Her stories not only bring out harsh realities of social disparity, but they have also become a most effective source of inspiration for the suffering lot to muster courage and offer resistance to their committers of atrocities. These literary creations bring out diverse patterns of resistance adopted by the miserable people in accordance with their position and circumstances. Out of the plethora of tales from her fictional world, three stories have been taken up in this paper to depict these patterns. These stories are, *The Why-Why Girl*, *Arjun* and *Draupadi*.

The Why-Why Girl is a story of an ever-curious and chirpy ten-year-old girl named Moyna, who belonged to the tribal community called Shabars. Ever since she gained her senses, Moyna was told about the Dos and the

Don'ts to be followed before the landlord and the others who belonged to the superior clans. She was made to do arduous chores in the landlord's house in exchange for insufficient leftover food and meager irregular wages. On top of this, she was also expected to offer words of gratitude with a submissive stance for this unfair treatment. Furthermore, nobody cared if while completing these chores, the small tribal children like her missed the chance to go to school. Due to the shallow and discriminating socio-religious norms, the tribals could not even draw water from the village wells and had to go and fetch water from far-off situated water resources. The children of the upper-class families lived a luxurious and far more privileged existence in comparison to the tribal children.

However, Moyna was an embodiment of curiosity, vigour, nerve as well as rational-mindedness. Unlike her submissive and meek parents, Moyna was seen posing questions after questions against the unfair ways of the upper-class people of her village. For instance, she would often ask:

"Why do I have to walk so far to the river to fetch water?"

"Why do we live in a leaf hut?"

"Why can't we eat rice twice a day?" (TWWG, 5)

When her mother reminded her to thank the Babu (landlord) for giving them leftover rice, Moyna did not agree,

"Why should I?" Moyna said. "Don't I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him?

Does he ever thank me? Why should I?" (TWWG, 4)

Moyna even seemed to possess a much better sense of self-respect in comparison to her mother and other tribals. She would always condemn accepting the leftover food from the privileged lot. She used to say, "Why should I eat their leftovers?" (TWWG, 5)

Although Moyna's questions were often dismissed or laughed off, her stance could be counted as a harbinger of resistance by the unprivileged lot against their long-borne atrocities. The pattern of resistance in Moyna's case could be regarded as an innocent and subtle plea expressed by a bright child, who was slowly moving towards the status of being self-aware. The books, which were shown to Moyna as the source of answers to all her queries, were used as a symbol of change and revolution in the story, a change that was soon going to become a long-awaited reality with the spread of education and awareness of human rights.

Another interesting story by Mahasweta Devi, where a unique form of resistance emerges, is a story entitled, 'Arjun'. Here the author tells the story of Ketu Shabar, a good-for-nothing drunkard tribal who turns into the saviour of his tribe. The story revolves around 'Arjun', a tree sacred to the Shabar tribe. For the Shabars who were once forest dwellers, Arjun was a manifestation of the divine. They believed that the tree had protected and benefitted them since time immemorial. In fact, the Arjun tree was considered to be a symbol of their very existence. However, Bishal Mahato, a politician, wanted the tree to be cut down at all costs. He entrusts Ketu Shabar with this task. Ketu has his reservations about cutting down the tree that means everything to him but is left with no choice as Mahato threatens to send him to jail if he fails to accomplish the task.

"You have to cut down the arjun tree," Bishal said.

"Why Babu?" Ketu was startled.

"Just do what I say."

"Please babu, I've just come out of jail, babu."

"If I wanted to send you back, would you be able to prevent it?"

"No, babu." (Arjun, 2)

The situation was indeed a trying one for the tribal community. As Manu Mangattu recounts:

These tribals had, for long, been jungle dwellers and as forests got cleared and trees felled, they are now forced to live in the prosperous village of the Bandihi. Society and the system have continually persecuted, exploited and almost obliterated this handful of tribals from the face of the earth. And when Mahato orders the Arjun to be cut down, it is like obliterating the last mute symbol of their existence. (Mangattu, 2)

However, Ketu seeks help from his friends, and together they hatch a plan to outwit Mahato and instead of using his money to cut the tree, use it to protect the symbol of their ancient heritage. They cook up a dream wherein Mahato pays Diga, one of the tribesmen, money and instructs him to build a concrete base around the trunk of Arjun. They spread this news far and wide that a word has been received from God and everyone should pay homage to the Arjun tree. People pour from far and wide to make their offerings to the 'gram devata'. When Mahato returns to the village, he receives a shock as he never expected the tribesmen to go against his commands but could not do anything against their solidarity which was witnessed for the first time. Evidently, Mahato gets a taste of his own medicine, as the Shabars use his money to make a permanent base to safeguard Arjun. Here, resistance has taken the pattern of a covert demonstration of solidarity against injustice perpetrated on a whole community. Despite losing his money, Mahato did not have the courage to go against such a vehement display of religious sentiments by the tribals. Through this story, Devi seems to be imploring the tribals to rise above their marginal and subjugated status and use the force of togetherness to fight back against all forms of injustice.

The third story, *Draupadi*, presents the most overt form of resistance cum protest against the infernal experiences borne by the tribals at the hands of the so-called custodians of law and justice. *Draupadi* is a story about Dopdi Mehjen, a woman who belongs to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. She was a fighter for social justice, who with her husband, Dhulna, murders wealthy landlords and usurps their wells, which are the primary source of water for the village. The government attempts to subjugate these tribal rebel groups through many means: kidnapping, murder, and rape. After Dopdi is captured, Senanayak instructs the army officers to rape her to extract information about the rebel uprising. Ironically, the same officers who violated her body, insist that she covers up once she is 'done with'. However, to the shock and embarrassment of the police officers, Dopdi rips off her clothes, refuses to cover or wash her mutilated body, and walks toward officer Senanayak, exclaiming, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of" (*Draupadi*,402). She walks out, naked, bruised and wounded, refusing to hide the evidence of brutality and unwilling to be shamed. This disturbs the officers and the Senanayak who are unsure of what to do in this unprecedented and unpredictable situation. The body that was given lifelong bruises as a means of punishment, could not be made to surrender. In fact, the bruised body was used as a weapon against the very perpetrators of injustice. Laughing at the dismay and embarrassment of the officers and refusing to let them cover her, Dopdi vehemently retorted, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (*Draupadi*, 402) As Shweta Radhakrishnan appropriately writes:

Before I heard the laugh of the Medusa, it was the laugh of Dopdi Mehjen that rang through, clear, unwavering and unashamed. Dopdi was the first female character I had encountered in literature, who, in the face of unimaginable violence, retained her sense of agency as an act of resistance – despite the most heinous efforts to strip her of it. (Radhakrishnan, 1)

Thus, Mahasweta Devi's fictional universe abounds with numerous sagas of various forms of resistance against atrocities and injustice. Her heart-rendering tales have been built around the real instances of both brutal as well as subtle acts of the slaughter of humanity, some of which were personally witnessed by her. On the one hand, her tales help the readers in obtaining a true picture of insensitive marginalization as well as erosion of democracy taking place in many rural and tribal parts of India, and on the other hand, they stimulate the courage in the suffering masses to unflinchingly adopt any suitable means to display resistance against the acts of injustice challenging their peaceful and dignified existence.

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