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Mahasweta Devi: An Advocate of Tribal Cause

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ABSTRACT

Caste and class of people in India have played a very crucial role in shaping their life. There are some castes and classes of people known as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes. These groups of people, unlike the mainstream community and so-called upper castes and elite group, do not enjoy superior status in the society. They have been pushed to the margin due to certain religious and social limitation, and therefore, they have to content themselves by living under inferior social status. They remained unnoticed and, and their contributions in the society remained unsung and unappreciated until some great souls like Mahasweta Devi started foregrounding and depicting their toils and turmoil in their writings. The objective of this paper is to bring forth the attempts made by Mahasweta Devi in order to arouse consciousness in tribal community, to advocate their cause, and to harbinger a dawn in their prolonged dark life.

Keywords: Tribes, Dislocation, Margin, Exploitation, Dalits, Oppression.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the most prominent and prolific Indian writers, whose relentless service through writing for the improvement of the lives of the tribal by showing their culture to the people and to the world at large is highly praiseworthy and commendable. She spent a major part of her life for the development and the upliftment of the tribal people. She wrote some of the books namely, Chhoti Munda and His Arrow, Aranyar Adhikar, Mother 1084, The Queen of Jhansi, The Fire Within, and Prothom Path "showing the culture of the tribal people, their identity and their history" (Sambyal and Rana 10). Her attempts of fiction are oeuvre of thoughts showing how to overthrow domination of the society's biased concept and also those thoughts that are filed with gaps and showing symbols of marginalisation of the tribal. In the words of Guha, the history of India lies in the nationalistic feeling of the elites belonging to



India (qtd by Délice, 11). He held that the history of details India has been written by the mainstream people living in the society having biased views and they have most often failed to state the struggle of the tribal and the struggle of the subaltern people. By mentioning their history in most of her books, she has clearly highlighted the efforts that marginalised society make against discrimination and ill behaviour towards them by the elite class. She has, in a successful manner, challenged the gaps as well as the absences in the history of the tribal people written by those belonging to the mainstream community. Vidhya, and Natarajan rightly observe, "She took the strategies of deconstruction to ensure that there is establishment of correct history with the help of her literary works and also with the depiction of non-heroes as original heroes"(89).

In the form of tradition, a great entity survives about the culture of the tribe including their glorious past. This has been transmitted orally from one generation to the other generation. "It has been adopted as songs, myths and poetry in an unavoidable manner" (Talukdar, 44). In an intentional manner, the historians do not mention their work and they make use of the same in the form of fictional work. However, it has been only Maheswati Devi who has used the life of the tribal people who used it as a real-life example.

In her novel *Chotti Munda & His Arrow*, the novelist has projected the troubled and turmoil life of a tribal hero Munda, who wants to start a new life in a proper place so that he can live free from feudal oppression and also so that he can lead a life away from using the forest products. The story has been depicted as part of the colonial period in which India was fighting for independence (Mahasweta 15). In this context, Nithiya and Thavaseelan write:

She successfully delineates forced removal, tribal displacement, and feudal oppression that were by the landlords making them serve as bonded labour. The establishment of education, occupation and new religious views shows the beginning of globalisation in the contemporary times. This however shows that the tribes have been subject to great subjugation and shattering to their culture so that their tribal identity is completely erased which is against the cultural pattern of the ongoing politics. Not only had the tribes even Hindus who suffer subjugation are also dragged along with the tribe. This shows clear cultural and social differences that are drawn against the tribe however they still get united under one roof that is poverty, submission, and bonded labour (121).



Exploitation of the resources provided by the nature of the country is very much persistent in both colonial and post-colonial times. This greatly affects the livings of the tribes, their family, and those who have their survival purely based on forest. The land has been mostly occupied with the natural outsiders who belong to the main stream in an idea they are using the natural resources for the purpose of uplifting the economy of the country and to make the lives of the tribal better. This has nonetheless pushed the lives of the Tribes away so much more that they have become close to becoming shrunk. "The displacement of the tribal from the lands of forest where they would feel a sense of belonging has been rightly portrayed in the novel *Chotti Munda & His Arrow*" (Sambyal, and Rana 87).

The main character that is the grandfather of Chhoti has faced different types of problems such as dislocation and also his efforts to settle has become useless. The forced departure of the ethnic group from their original birth place has formed a psychological and also a socioeconomic up rootedness. This has been depicted with the help of characters such as Dhani Munda, Purti Munda in such a manner that the character of the protagonist is shaped properly. The tribal history is also reinterpreted and re-examined by the novelist in the novel under discussion which has chiselled the character of Chhoti to become indeed a fictional legend. This type of recognition attributes to the identity of tribal people and it also helps with the introduction of tribal people to the international readers as well. "Providing space to rewrite history with the help of historical events that is related to the tribes to control against the estrangement from the natural belonging giving them the due identify and recognition that they truly deserve" (Vidhya and Natarajan, 34).

The struggle and life of Purti Munda as shown clearly epitomizes the displacement and the state of undergoing pain, distress, and hardships. The tribal people suffer a lot and they are forced to the utmost margin by the people who belong to the mainstream, and also those who is considered as an outsider who are continuously spoiling the forest, hills, and rivers by exploiting the forest resources so that they could make benefit from it without being much worried about the ecological balance in the world full of materialism. Dhani Munda, one other character is an epitome of rebel who follows the peasants and the tribal people for establishing the land and other natural rights over the forest so that they could lead a very peaceful life. The author, Devi has clearly projected the wants of the people and also has



focused on the salvation of the people. Dhani teaches the other character, Choti about the tribal life having skills full of valour and a tool encompassing occupation and hunting that can provide respectable identity to the tribes. To him the study of forest and of the tribes would not require any outside source but the real connection with the tribe in the forest with the help of Munda in the description as, "He called the jungle Our Mother, Dhani said. Let me learn yet" jungle. With jungle learnin" ye won" die starvin". What isn't there in t" jungle?"(Devi 11)

Just like Mahasweta Devi, one another author known as Kamala Markandaya with the help of her writings, shows the way how social consciousness as part of the Indian culture shows the problems of the people such as torture, hunger and other trussle of their lives. In her novel known as *The Coffers Dams*, she too has explained the pains and sufferings of the tribal people in an explicit manner. Thus, it can be said that both the authors in their work have clearly stated the problems of the Tribal people from their forest land making them feel either socially deprived or mentally deprived and also make them feel separated with cultural recognition. The author has focused on the effort of tribes in maintaining their culture and also focusing in adapting their mainstream importance of culture knowing that the separation that they face is based on amisunderstood society perception focusing to gain national identity with the help of both the novels (Devi 12).

In the story *Little Ones*, Devi has tried to describe as to what lack of nutrition and lack of food can do to someone's body and mind. The story depicts the unsettling encounter that has taken place between the tribe and the village that is struck with famine. The relief officer has been called as Singh, who has the responsibility to help and also rehabilitate the tribal people. The story is a ghost story and is a social documentary. Starvation can decrease the original size of a person to mere pygmies. This is what happens in the story of *Little Ones* as well as supernatural children are in real. Thus, Maheswata Devi is a well-known writer for making her opinions heard regarding the upheavals of the tribal people whose sadness are always unnoticed and also undervalued or not taken care of. Being an active member of over many social groups and tribal groups she has made her life committed towards social activities and other creative writing. Complementary to each other, she has indulged herself to the



upliftment of marginalised sections of the community so that one can feel that a proper characterisation of her writings.

In her *The Book the Hunter*, she has exposed the cultural values of the Shabars and their decline in the book. The decline of their family has been gradual and she has presented a nuclear argument in her book. The position and the issues of the tribal community of the Shabars has been shown in this engrossing and sweeping novel. She has reflected the problems of the tribal people in the society that is mainly dominated by the patriarchy so that it is properly reflected to the people or to the Universe. Thus, she has focused on lifestyle, relationship, and culture of the people in a happy manner instead of focusing on the same in a negative way.

Her writings depict from the close knowledge of the ground realities and most of her stories show a proper range of issues that is associated with the life of the tribal people such as deprivation, isolation, degradation, and exploitation of the underprivileged and poor people. The landless, poor, bonded labour, small peasants and contract slaves in the areas of Bihar and West Bengal are represented by her in a proper manner. She has a deep sympathy for the tribal people and she has represented their life in the most proper manner showing their customs, traditions, and other problems. Most of her stories deal with the decline of the ecosystem and the irregular policy of the forests of the government that has spoiled the cultural life of the tribal people. She has urged for the sustainable development of the progress and it can be made in the absence of the ecological devastation that is being perpetrated.

Thus, it can be said that Devi was a very eminent writer and also a social activist who wrote in the middle 1900s, fighting and depicting the rights of the dalits in India. She did not shy away from portraying the wrongs and discrimination they had to face and also the injustices that was plaguing the Indian society. Other than being such a powerful novelist, she is also remembered for her activism and is also known for fighting for the rights of the people who are oppressed in the tribal communities. Moreover, she also worked hard for the landless labourers belonging to the eastern India who formed an intimate connection with them and she could also understand their problems and issues in a grassroot level.



The Bengali culture and also the nation respect and consider Devi a treasure in the literary world. She has written more than one hundred novels and other collections in the form of short stories. Most of her works were political writings, and also children plays or fictional stories. The void that was left on literary world by her death in the year 2016 could not be filled. She has written many novels and short stories forming a connection with the people of India.

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