

Mahasweta Devi's *Water*: A Critique of Social Reality and its Relevance

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Abstract: The present paper endeavours to analyze Mahasweta Devi's play *Water* translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay as a document of social reality and its critique. Untouchability, caste and culture conflict, extreme poverty, illiteracy, lack of basic amenities of life, Naxalism, Government officials' apathy and administrative reluctance, nexus between Zamindars, administrative and police officers to exploit poor untouchables are the core issues dealt in dexterously. Rooted in history and following myth as well as contemporary reality, with socio-economic milieus ranging from the urban bourgeoisie to the urban under world, rural untouchable settlements to rural tribal communities, the present play offers a view of India rarely seen in literature. Further, it closely studies the thematic concerns in her plays and different modes of exploitation prevalent in both urban and rural world. Uniqueness of her dramatic vision and her artistic excellence are also incorporated in the present study.

Keywords: Culture, Knowledge, Caste, Community, exploitation.

Mahasweta Devi is one of our foremost literary personalities, a prolific and best-selling author in Bengali of short fiction and novels; a deeply political social activist who has been working with and for tribals and marginalized communities like the landless labourers of eastern India for years; the editor of a quarterly, *Bortika*, in which the tribals and marginalized peoples themselves document grass root-level issues and trends; and a socio-political commentator whose articles have appeared regularly in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Frontier* and other journals. Mahasweta Devi has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies in India. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities was a first of its kind. Her powerful, haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse by leading scholars. Her innovative use of language has expanded the conventional borders of Bengali literary expression. Standing as she does at the intersection of vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class, she is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka, to literary parents. Her father Manish Ghatak was a well-known poet and novelist of the Kallol era and mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer and a social worker. Mahasweta Devi's schooling was in Dhaka, but after the partition of India she moved to West Bengal and thereafter joined Vishvabharti University in Shantiniketan and completed B.A. (Hon's) in English and M.A. in English at Calcutta

University. In 1964, she began teaching at Bijoygarh College which was an institution for working class women students. During that period she also worked as a journalist and as a creative writer she has dedicated her writings to the struggle of tribal people of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The brutal oppression of tribal peoples and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials figures as the most important thematic concern in her writings. She herself has acknowledged the source of inspiration:

I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations....The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazing noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing. (*Wikipedia*:2)

For her writings she was honoured with Saitya Academy Award (Bengali) (1979), Padam Shri (1986), Jnanpith Award (1996), Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and the Creative Communication Arts (1997), Honoris causa (1999) by Indira Gandhi National Open University, Padam Vibhushan (2006) and several other awards. *Mother of 1084, Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny, Bayen and Water* are her major dramatic works translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. The plot of the *Water* is constructed in fourteen Scenes. She has used folk theatre conventions---use of coloured masks (189), miming (183), dholak, offstage drum (184), cyclorama (165,198)--large curtain in a theatre to show a river in spate, frequent use of chorus (183, 190, 194-195), Image of Mansa—the snake goddess (194), choric dance, drink, Bhadu and Tushu (189)—seasonal folk religious festivals in the form of choral singing of a large ensemble of traditional songs and simple rituals; use of light and dark for change of scene, rural backdrop—Charsa block, tribal gods, most of the scenes open with red glow over the stage and ends with dark, use of dialectic words, the doms, the chamars, the chandals, the keots, and the tiors constitute the fabric of untouchable society and help to create congenial atmosphere and effect of the dramatic presentation. The play dramatizes untouchability, caste and culture conflict, poverty, illiteracy, emerging problem of naxalism, nexus among power centres, government officials' attitude towards untouchables and the acute problem of water in Charsa block. Maghai, Phulmani—his wife and Dhura—son represent lower strata of the society; whereas Santosh Pujari is a Brahmin and the real culprit who represents the mechanism developed for perpetual subordination of the untouchables. Maghai, Phulmani and Dhura are the victim of caste venom. Santosh Pujari/Babu is the head of the Panchayat, money-lender, “informer to police” (190), zamidar with “land and ration shops” (162), “demon of demons” (160) enjoys relief fund meant for

poor, he has close ties with SDO and Police officer who epitomize government and administrative apathy towards poor people. Maghai is gifted water diviner who helps to locate the water reservoir and government wells are dug, irony is that he as well as the whole community of untouchables is deprived of using water from the well:

DHURA: The doms, the chamars, the chandals go without water.... We scrape holes in the sandy bed of the Charsa in the night, and by the early dawn it gathers a little water. At the slightest delay in collecting it, it evaporates. The panchayat wells are supposed to be for the public, yet we're denied access to them. In the daytime, they're for washing your cattle, in the night we try to steal water, and you set your dogs loose on us...(152)

Jiten is a ray of hope that has been a follower of Gandhiji and worked all his life with tribals and scheduled caste belts. His dedication and visionary mind enthralls the lives of untouchables with new aspirations and hopes; he also helped to resolve acute water crisis by constructing a dam on Charsa, but in vain. Antagonistic forces—Santosh Pujari, SDO and Police officer conspire against them and open fire on the very day of inaugural ceremony of the dam creating melodramatic scene on the stage—Maghai Dom dead and seventeen wounded, dam crumbled, the river leapt through and seemed to snatch Maghai away. Cyclorama shows the rising, gushing water, with the sound of the water, roaring till the stage goes dark.

The failure of the move of the untouchables alarm us that our society is still deeply caste ridden and we have to work to bring change in the attitude of the upper caste people and government officials. And for the inclusive growth of the society, lower section can't be left on the mercy of the ruling dons. The play awakens all of us to comprehend the real life situations of untouchables and tackle them humanely as they are the part and parcel of our very society. "Mahasweta Devi's engagement" comments Vandana Gupta, "with the postcolonial exceeds the narrow referential of dates, eras, and epochs. Mahasweta's literature negotiates postcoloniality by questioning the very textuality of fiction by way of problematizing the traditional textual authority, aesthetic autonomy and a unified, stable interpretation" (*Preface* viii). B.S. Jamuna observes the "perpetual denial of human rights" (139) which naturally lead to discontent and eventually to rebellion against oppression and exploitation in the play *Water*. The play ends the villagers' struggle for water rights. Mahasweta Devi's narratives signify the civil rights manifesto that Jiten symbolizes in the play" (141). Her plays offer the critiques of social reality—the predicament of the tribal backwaters, the exploitation of the landed rich or the urban administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke out a meager livelihood, the

plight of women who are breadwinners and/or victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, ill-treated wives, and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price are the major concerns dealt in meticulously. Sen and Yadav consider her “the icon of Third World Literature in the First World academia” (12).

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