
Models of Woman in the Stories of Mahasweta Devi

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Paper Received on 15-02-2024, Accepted on 29-03-2024,

Published on 31-03-2024; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.1.642

Abstract:

Women writers have contributed a lot to the development of literature by throwing light on women's lives, irrespective of any language. They included different aspects of women's lives and created a new awareness of female society. They have voiced their sweets and spoils, joys and sorrows, ills and blessings. In this paper, an attempt has been made to have a bird's eye view of the models of women as portrayed by Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta Devi was an Indian writer in Bengali and an activist who worked hard for the growth of the tribal people. She was one of India's foremost literary figures from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She was the author of numerous novels, essays, and short stories. She was honored with various literary awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), the Jnanpith Award, the Raman Magsaysay Award, and India's civilian awards, Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. Through a reading of Mahasweta Devi's short stories, I trifurcated her women characters into

Fearless women

Victimized women

Mythical Archetype women

Keywords: female society, tribal people, activist, empowered, victimized, mythical

Mahasweta Devi portrays women characters in a patriarchal society in which they live. They experience sexual exploitation, discrimination, a lack of education, terrible marriages, the loss of children, and much more. However, many find a way to endure or

stand up to their oppressors, whether by asking questions, literary standing in front of them, demanding they be seen, or running away from mythical archetype women. However, Devi does not sugarcoat the experiences of women, and some of her characters do not have a way out as Jashoda's death by cancer and Chandi's ostracization and death by train. She seeks to give a complete picture.

Women in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi can be categorized into three categories. In the first category are the fearless, intelligent, and active women. They boldly face any challenge or oppose it by raising questions against injustice. They do not give up in any circumstances. One such character is Mary Oraon, in the thought-provoking story 'The Hunt.' The setting of the story is the Village of Kuruda. The whole story centers around a festival named the Hunting Festival or JaniParab, where women are given complete freedom to have liquor, dance, and hunt like men for a day. Mary Oraon is considered an illegitimate child. Her mother worked as a caretaker of the Bungalow of an Australian named Dixon as colonial masters left the area after independence. In 1959, Dixon's son comes to sell that bungalow, and he impregnates Bikhani and deserts her. Prasad ji now owns that bungalow, and Bikhani's daughter Mary Oraon also works there with her mother. She is tall and beautiful and does not look like a tribal woman, though she is one.

She is efficient in her work. Even the owner's wife says: "You have to take words from a girl who works like an animal, carries a forty-pound bag on her back, and boards the train to clean the whole house in half an hour." She has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen.

She also protests when twelve annas are paid to men for cutting down the sal trees and eight annas to women for cutting branches. She protests, although in vain:

Twelve annas and eight annas! No Porter carried gentleman's case for the price (9)

Mary has a chivalric attitude. She is tired of the Tehsildar's single-minded pursuit. She does not involve Jalim, her fiancé, in this matter as she knows that Jalim would be wild if she let him know, and the Tehsildar has a lot of money and men. He can destroy him. So, she

decides to solve the problem by herself. She always has two weapons. When Mary's virginity is threatened, she uses her first weapon, i.e., verbal threats, but he continues to chase her. One day, when she returned from the market, Tehsildar caught her and said he would not let her go. Fortunately, she was able to escape, but she hatched a plan to put an end to his sexual aggression. She sets up a rendezvous with the Tehsildar in the forest on the day of a festival, which is called JaniParab (in which, after every twelve years, gender roles are reversed. Women have liquor, dance, and hunt for a day). She has decided to become a hunter for this year's ritual hunt. She meets Tehsildar, as was expected, who is more than eager. She proceeds to hack him to death with her second weapon, Machete and murders her oppressor.

The second character is Giribala in the story Giribala.

The story's central character is Giribala, a fourteen-year-old woman married to Aulchand, a terrible husband and father. Although her life with Aulchand was not good, it was manageable enough before she had children. She is a girl with courage. She manages to advocate for herself and her daughters occasionally. When she bears three daughters and notices that the potential of suffering has increased, she goes to the doctor to sterilize herself without the knowledge of Aulchand. She is not afraid of him. When Aulchand calls her a whore Giri grabs a knife and hisses that if he ever says things like that again, she will cut off the children's heads as well as her own. Aulchand is scared of her.

When Aulchand demands bamboo from her father, she denies it clearly and suggests they can work together at Panchayat Road and earn money for their home.

Once, Giri learns that her husband Aulchand and Mohan (a corrupt man) took Bela to Kandi town and married her to a strange man from Bihar. It was a racket. Giri immediately takes action. She takes her other daughter, Pori, to Babu's house and instructs her not to go anywhere with her father. She does not talk to her husband, which scares him.

Not only Aulchand but also Mohan is afraid of her. Once, when Mohan asks Aulchand to find a better rickshaw plier in a big

town, Mohan says that he will not help him as he is afraid of Aulchand's wife. When he learns that Aulchand is trying to make up with his wife, he says he will not involve her directly but will make contact.

Her daughter Pori also meets the same fate. Once Aulchand yells at her for getting sterilized because they could have more money from girls, she wishes him to be dead. She recalls Bangshi saying that Bela provided the roof and now Pori walls. She takes action against a system that exploits her young daughters and makes her responsible for their fate as she did not give her silver to Aulchand and took a step to sterilize herself. Her two daughters have become prostitutes, and now she fears for Maruni, her youngest daughter. She withdraws her money from Babu's wife's safekeeping and leaves Aulchand with a message that if he ever comes to chase her, she will put her neck on the rail line before a speeding train.

This was an unexpected step for the people of the Village. They are shocked to know that a woman can do this. Giri also wishes she had taken this step earlier and could have saved Bela and Pori.

Now Devi's other story, representing a fearless girl child in front of us, is The Why Why Girl. The name of the girl is Moyna, an n-year-old girl. She belongs to a landless community and works for others. Moyna could not go to school because she had to collect firewood, fetch water, and do other work for the landlord. She is a curious child and always has many questions to ask others. That is why she is called the why girl. Once, Khiri reminds Moyna to thank the Babu who has given her rice, but Moyna asks why she has to thank him even though he never thanks her for all her work. Moyna wants to know more about her life. That is why she asks questions, but instead of being appreciated, she is called an obstinate child. It is because she challenges their way of thinking.

One evening, when Moyna asks the narrator why she reads before going to sleep, she replies that all the answers are hidden. She decides to learn to read and becomes a teacher. She is portrayed as a role model. She conveys that sensitization and knowledge may be the solution for a community living in a society like hers.

Women are subjected to various kinds of physical and mental

torture in their own families and also in society. Mahasweta Devi portrays this through the characters of Dhoul, Shanichari, Josmina, and Chinta. All these four women suffer in their lives due to caste or sex. They are exploited or, we can say, tortured. By portraying such characters, she does not want our sympathy for them, but through such characters, she wants to make us rethink society and its worthless norms.

The play shows how society declares a working-class woman bayen. She is the mother of Bhagirath and the wife of Malinder. Chandi belongs to the Dom caste, which works in cemeteries. She joins that job after the death of her father. She meets Malinder there and marries him. Not after Bhagirath was born, Chandi came home crying, saying that people stoned her and she meant evil, but Mahinder says that people are envious of him.

Moreover, he did not think much of it, but this was the beginning of her misfortune. One day, when she was at the children's cemetery late at night and putting brambles on their graves to save them from wolves, villagers saw her and called her a bayen. She is also blamed for the death of Tukni (Malinder's niece), who quit her work on that day. Two months later, she was putting brambles on the graves on a stormy night. Now, villagers declared her a bayen. At this time, her husband joins them and announces that his wife is a bayen. She gets respect only after her death when people come to know that she sacrificed her life to save the passengers and cargo. The government announces her as a brave woman. Now Bhagirath declares that Chandi was his mother and she was never a bayen.

Thus, the story adds to the layers of women's suffering literature where a woman who does not fit in her society's expectations is declared a witch and has to lead a life in exile. Although Chandi is successful in removing the stigma of bayen from her name but it was only after her death.

Similar tales of women's victimization are seen in the short story Shanichari, a twelve-year-old tribal girl from the Village Oraon. She is going haat with her grandmother in a compartment. They are sitting on the compartment floor and picking lice from each other's hair. A blind beggar Hiralal warns Shanichari to be aware of Gohuman

Bibi, a pimp.

We are shown the pitiable condition of the villagers, especially the girls. There is drought, and there is the Adi Jati Raksha Morcha movement. Many joined the morcha with their bows and arrows. In such a tormented time, Devi exposed the brutality of the military and police force. Young girls are taken to the forest and raped brutally. Their clothes are burnt, and they are forced to live in the forest. Shanichari's fiancé Chand Turkey is shot dead. She is homeless and without clothes after the confrontation between the police and tribal people. She becomes the prey of circumstances and is sold to Brick Kila at Barasat in West Bengal, where they have to work all day and, in much worse, subjected to sexual exploitation. They are forced to live in pigsties; there is one single tubewell. The headmaster calls them by their name.

"Today you go to them, tomorrow the driver, the day after the munshi (52)

Festival days are much worse for them. They are forced to drink and gang-raped repeatedly

Here is the horrible picturisation of the pitiable condition of those girls who become the prey to the system.

Shanichari returns when pregnant but is not accepted and is an outcast from society. People do not care when their masters exploit them, but if she gets pregnant, she has to live in a hut outside, and after death, she is buried somewhere else, not in their burial ground.

Shanichari realized that the individual and society were to blame for the situation. She remarks:

Everything around you, ev-e-r-y-thing. Shanichari stretched out her arms to include the world around her, standing stock still (56). Mahasweta Devi ends her story on a note mixed with hope and despair. Hope lies in Shanichari's resolve to establish her identity. Her other character, Dhoulis, also represents the plight of a lower-caste woman whose social conditions pushed her toward prostitution.

Dhoulis belongs to a Dalit community, Dushad, in Bihar. She is a young widow and lives with her mother. She is seduced by an upper caste man, Misrilal, who impregnates her but denies to marry her as she is not of her caste.

When Misrilal's mother comes to know that Dhoulis is pregnant because of his son, she says, "So what? The men of our family have planted their seed in so many dead and ganja girls ... It is always the fault of the woman. For not considering a brahman's honor, she is even more to blame" (13, 14).

People of her clan and the people of the upper caste are curious to know whether Misrilal will marry her or not. If not, when Misrilal denies Dhoulis is declared a prostitute. Here, the double standard of society is clearly shown by Mahasweta Devi, where only a woman is blamed, and no one once questioned Misrilal for impregnating Dhoulis. As she is stamped as a prostitute by the Panchayat, no one offers her a job. The shop owner refuses to give her a job, afraid, "If I give you a job, the data will be annoyed with me" (27).

People throw stones at her door at night. Unable to bear hunger, she is forced into the profession of prostitution.

Here also, societal dual norms are responsible for the pitiable condition of Dhoulis, where only a woman sins if she becomes pregnant without getting married. No one asked questions to men in a patriarchal society.

Likewise, another character, Chinta, a young widow, belongs to an economically weaker Village. She works in a big city. Her only fault is that she loved and trusted the wrong man, who deserted her with two children. Like Devi's other victimized women, she is exploited on the grounds of morality and religion, which is only for women in a patriarchal society. Villagers come to take her back on the condition that they will organize repentance rites, and if she does not follow, they will not cremate her body in the Village, and her son will be considered an outcast.

Finally, Chinta has to sell her two daughters and leaves the city with final words:

There is no god for the poor.....those who have no god have no one at all. (94)

As Mahasweta Devi most of the time writes about socially weak and economically disadvantaged classes, it can be concluded that these women are exploited not only by their masters but also by

the people of their community. Women could be called marginalized. Myth is one of the significant factors in cultural composition. Like history, it repeats itself. Contemporary writers often use myths to gain a better understanding of the past. Devi's characters in her short stories have the reflection of Hindu mythology. Draupadi and Jashoda are mythical archetypes. Her character, Dopdi, reminds us of Draupadi from Mahabharata, as her life is full of hardships, pains, and disgrace. Dopdi is a Santhal tribe girl. She is an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman who leads a politicized life. She is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of tribal people.

The government uses all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder, and rape. Dopdi and her husband, Dulna, are on the most wanted list in West Bengal. They murdered Surja Sahu to claim tubewells and wells, which were their primary source of water.

After the murder, both had to leave their native place to live in a dense forest. It reminds us of the Pandavas living in exile to combat the injustice committed toward them. Draupadi disguised herself as Sairindhri during exile, and Dopdi lived in the forest with an ambiguous identity. The police, in search of searching for Dopdi, seem like Duryodhana, ordering Dushashana to go and drag Draupadi down to the conference hall. When Dopdi is apprehended, she is brutally raped at the order of Senanayak. It reminds us of the Cheerharan episode, and we wish there were also a Krishna to save her, but her fate is even more challenging than Draupadi in Mahabharata. When she is taken to Senanayak, she is there without clothes, saying that she is not ashamed as, in reality, there is no man. Her ironic speech created a stir among military authorities who were on a massive hunt for her. Another character, Jashoda, from the story Breast -Giver reminds us of Yashoda, the foster mother of Shri Krishna. She fed the children of Halder's household with her milk. She is like Yashoda, a selfless mother.

To conclude, Mahasweta Devi's female characters have to face miserable situations to maintain their existence in society. She depicts the economic, political, and sexual oppression of women in tribal areas. They suffer on the basis of caste and class, and Mahasweta Devi points her finger at society for its injustice to women.

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