

RE-HISTORICISING THE TRIBALS: A READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *THE BOOK OF THE HUNTERS*

Supriya Singh

Recent struggles and debates around the rather tentative concept of multiculturalism in western democracies have often fueled discussions of minority histories. As the writing of history has increasingly become entangled with the so-called politics and production of identity after the Second World War, the question has arisen in all democracies of whether to include in the history of the nation, histories of previously excluded groups. In the 1960's, this list usually contained names of subaltern social groups and classes, such as former slaves, working classes, convicts and women. This mode of writing history comes to be known in the seventies as history from below.

The twenty first century novels often make attempts to expose the untold stories of the unexplored people. It peeps in the houses or localities or societies of the common people, who were not paid heed until the Second world war, to observe their condition, read their minds, notice there locale, languages, customs and religion and most significantly their suffering and exploitation directed upon them by the elite class that weaved the whole affair and pervaded it through hidden power politics.

In the twenty-first century the Dalit/ tribal discourse on human rights has been gathering momentum in the literary works of Indian writers. The period witnesses literary works exposing atrocities on schedule castes and tribes. Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan had set the trend. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi in their regional languages especially in leftist states of west Bengal and Kerela were in forefront of expressing concern for the human rights violations to the oppressed especially, Dalits and Tribals.

Before considering the ways in which the “tribal” Indian has been constructed within cultural discourse, it is worth considering some material facts. India has the largest tribal population in the world, comprising approximately 67.6 million people and constituting 8% of the national population. The government of India has not accepted that the tribals are the indigenous people of India thereby denying them basic rights and representation both at home and abroad. It is almost universally acknowledged by

sociologists, anthropologists and developmental economists that the condition of tribal peoples in terms of access to land and a living, health care and education has worsened in the last twenty years and that the impact of development programmes has been at best, uneven and at worst, disastrous. The literacy rate of the rural tribal woman, for example remains the lowest of all social groups in India.

Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali activist, writer and the recipient of Jnanapith award for the year 1999 stands unique among Indian writers in portraying the societal and governmental/ state violations of human rights to Dalits, Tribals, women and children. She has spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of west Bengal and the south-east of Bihar as a political anthropologist, investigative Journalist and editor of a "People's magazine". Born in 1926 to urban, middle-class, a professional writer, Mahasweta herself has over a hundred books to her credit, including novels, plays and collections of short-stories. She has said that in the tribal people she has found "an endless source of ingredients for writing" (Bardhan1990:24). By lending voice to the voiceless, Mahasweta emerges as a fighter for human rights. According to Gayatri Spivak: "Mahasweta Devi is an unusual within the Bengali literary tradition as Foucault or Derrida within the philosophical or political mainstream in France" (Spivak 1993a:46). She has lived and worked amongst the disenfranchised tribal and outcaste communities, writing particularly about how tribal low-caste women are exploited in post-independence India – abducted and prostituted to repay their fathers' or husbands' loans from upper-caste, money-lenders, sold for purposes of rape, such women are, in Mahasweta's words, just merchandise, commodities.

In her stories, Mahasweta Devi do not just fictionalize subaltern history or record events from outside. She is rather fascinated by the individual in history and her own involvement with the indigenous tribal people. In her conversation with Spivak, she says:

...my involvement started long ago. In 1965, I started going to Palamu. Of course my mental involvement was already there. I was interested in them, but did not know very much... when I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them. (Spivak 1993: iv)

Mahsweta Devi symbolizes the tribal as the pre-historic pterodactyl. There is no way of establishing contact or communication with the pterodactyl to know the message it wishes to convey. Yet, ironically, “the tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply doesn’t understand the parallel” (Spivak1993: ii). She immersed herself in the rehabilitation work of the tribals. She also wrote a lot at the same time, giving exposure to the plight of the tribals in her own journal, *Bortika*, and in the newspaper columns that she regularly wrote; she pestered the central and state administrations and fought for projects and funds; in 1986, she spearheaded the formation of Tribal Unity Forum (Adim Jati Aikya Parishad) to preclude ‘the disunity among the tribals that the system wants’ (Spivak 1993: ix).

Her stories are an extension of her activism and her reportage. Her intension is not to romanticize the tribals and give them a heroic life within the sealed subjectivity of her fiction but to imaginatively recreate their lives by transgressing the boundaries of life and fiction. She draws upon her experience with them and her knowledge of their philosophy of living – each life a confirmation of courage, wisdom and endurance. The stories are linked together with the common thread of profound ecological loss, the loss of the forest as foundation of life and also, as Spivak insists, with the complicity; however remote, ‘of the power lives of local developers with the forces of global capital’ (Spivak 1993:201).

All her novels and short stories deals with one or the other doubly effaced characters like the tragic narrative of the extremely courageous Naxalite tribal woman Dopdi or Draupadi; Mary Oraon of ‘The Hunt’ who let the violence ricochet off her; Douloti in ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ whose brutalized corpse marks the limits of decolonization in post-independence India and the failure of political independence to effectively change the class and gender inequalities in Indian Society; and in *The Book of the Hunter*, she has dealt with the tribal community shabar and a threat to their existence.

This paper would particularly focus on Mahasweta Devi’s *The Book of the Hunter*. This charming, expansive novel set in sixteenth century medieval Bengal draws on the life of the great medieval poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti, whose epic poem *Abhayamangal*, better known as *Chandimangal*, records the socio-political history of the times. In the section of that epic called *Byadhakhanda* – the Book of the Hunter – he describes the lives of the hunter tribes, the shabars, who lived in the forest and its

environs. Mahasweta Devi explores the cultural values of the shabars and how they cope with the slow erosion of their way of life, as more and more forest land gets cleared to make way for settlements. She uses the lives of two couples, the Brahman mukundaram and his wife, and the young Shabars, Phuli and Kalya, to capture the contrasting socio-cultural norms of the rural society of the time. The hunter tribes' refusal to cultivate and settle down is true of surviving forest tribes today also.

In her *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi documents the oral histories of the tribal communities before they disappear altogether. The novel deals with a particular tribe called 'shabars' to portray the condition of all tribal race whose existence is threatened as more and more city people go on recklessly cutting the forests and encroaching the tribal culture. The story tells us of the shabar culture and their traditions that are so closely and secretly wound up with the forest in which they live and roam. It tells of the forbidden, mysterious abode of the goddess Abhaya, of the gift of hunting that she has given them, the laws that she has laid down, and the consequences of breaking these laws, and of simple, natural way of life of these forest children. The story is placed in Ararha village where the people are united like a family with their leader Danko, who, giving all his knowledge to his daughter, Tejota, has left the village to live in the forest so as to guard the Abhayachandi's temple. The shabar people respect both Danko and his daughter, the old Tejota. The story also moves round the love-affair and marriage of Tejota's son, Kalya and his beloved and wife Phuli. There are several other young couples who move about carelessly in the whole community putting hand on each other's waist, but nobody dares to break the laws given by their goddess. In spite of all their shamelessness, they are much more civilized and sophisticated than we are. Their own social codes say widows can remarry, a woman's place is of honor, divorce is allowed etc. They are very strict to their rules regarding nature - they do not kill any animal in the season of mating etc. However, gradually the settlements from the city brought many changes in their life and this seems to bring ill-fortune to their society - indicated by the death of Kalya. And ultimately, to save them from this encroachment they all moved to another forest.

Though the novel ends here but raising many questions in the mind of readers and critics as to what Mahasweta Devi aims at? It is through this tragic story Mahasweta Devi's purpose is to pronounce how mainstream settlements have pushed further and further into the forests, encroaching not only into the hunting lands and homes of the tribals, but also into the delicate equilibrium of nature itself. For the

tribals, with their uncomplicated lives, it is not a difficult thing to leave their dwellings and move on to another home: but how many times, and where will they go when there are fewer and fewer forests? "The forests keep receding and the cities keep coming forward" says the tribal chief Danko Shabar sadly, even as he tries to mobilize his people to withstand these pressures. But relentlessly felling, burning and clearing the villages and townships have erased more and more forests from the earth.

Many events in the novel focus on their culture or the way they live. We find that they have their Abhaya culture and Abhayachandi Goddess and they do every thing only according to what their culture allows and it is to be noticed that their culture is far more intellectual than ours, the culture of the city people or the elite people. Whether knowingly or unknowingly or out of their superstition, the religious rituals they do, does not, in any way, break the ecological balance. They follow certain rules or patterns that depicts them as more nature loving. They maintain the balance by killing animals but not beyond a limit. For instance, we find Danko, the leader of the shabars announcing for limited killing of animals on the occasions of marriage.

If every girls father demanded, "Bring me this, bring me that", the forest would be exhausted. They're all Abhaya's creatures – do you want to kill them all in your desperate greed? (113)

He further says:

So now I'm going to make a rule that only five deerskins may be taken. And one or two wild boars - no one will ever give more than that. You've got a daughter's wedding and she's under Abhaya's protection – what's the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars? (p.66)

However while killing they are also particular about certain facts. They consider that the biggest sin lies in killing a pregnant deer or any other animal in their season of mating, that's why when the king of Dhalbhum, wanted hundred skins of male deer for some ceremony and his traders came with a contract to pay for each skin of male deer a rupee coin of pure silver, Kalya drove the traders away as it was "... the

time for the deer to mate. Any shabar who kills a deer during this period would have Abhaya's curse upon him.” (81). This is the only reason why Danko did not transfer the knowledge to his own son-in-law-

Megha had lost his right to become chief through his offence. Danko had said to him, 'You live in Abhaya's Jungle and she is the creator, nurturer and protector of all living beings on land and water. To disobey her law is the greatest of sins!. (84)

Unlike us, these shabar people do not have any passion for living a luxurious life. They are innocent tribal people living in the close vicinity of nature, they just enjoy their life in eating, drinking and merry-making, they are not mad to participate in the race for hyper culture. These innocent tribes are untouched by the evil emotions like pride, jealousy, envy etc. They are happy enough with a cloth to cover their body, rice to quench their hunger and a mate to pour their emotions on. “They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it.” (102) Kalachanda says:

They don't even know they are poor....they are always happy. They have so many festivals and holidays - both men and women dance and play on little drums. They mind their own business and are perfectly content. The men and women both toil hard....they have a fine life. (49).

The novel also tells us about their frankness regarding their customs of marrying, remarrying or choosing a mate "when husband and wife leave each other, they can both remarry. A widow could remarry her late husband's younger brother, or any other man. That was what Abhaya laid down. Give them full liberty and they will honor it absolutely" (120).

In an interview with Gabrielle Collu in 1997, Mahasweta Devi said in her own words:

I respect the Tribals too much. I respect Indian tribals because they are much more civilized and sophisticated than we are. Their own social codes say widows can remarry, divorce is allowed, men and women can divorce, a woman's place is of honor, there is no one who becomes an orphan because he or she has lost their parents. The community rears them. There are many

such laws prove that they were most civilized most sophisticated and they are the people all India has exploited like anything because they are black, because they don't speak the language. (Collu 1997:147-8)

Thus these tribal people always suffer from a muted identity and that's why in the beginning of the novel, we find the reassurance of Abhaya against all fears, She kept all her wild creatures, trees and forest children the shabars- safe in her lap, covered by her sari, but gradually they learnt that " a town had sprung up outside the forest, and that a king had established his capital there"(58). And ultimately, the shabars had to "hastily abandon this far edge of the town of Ararha, as they had done time and again with other settlements" seeking for "a place where there existed no city, no market, no king or any other caste or tribe, where there were only the forest, water and hills".

Thus Mahasweta Devi, talking about tribal identity says: "Indian history did not recognize the tribal fights, tribal rebellions. Never recognized them. Never wrote about them. Never mentioned them." (Collu 1997:148).

To Spivak's rhetorical question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' we may answer that the Subaltern can speak in Suheli, Bhojpuri and so on, if the theoretician has the capacity to listen'.

Therefore better histories can be written only on a clean slate (removing reality), which is possible by pushing history to its limits. If we follow this strategy of subaltern studies, we shall not be able to write better histories for a long time to come, or the time may not come at all. Will world historical forces stop functioning and wait for us until we are able to clean the slate? The question is who is benefiting from this strategy? We have no hope of getting political democracy and an egalitarian society since they are, according to subaltern studies, Eurocentric ideas, and cleaning the slate and finding people's history would take an unknowable amount of time in the future. What are the poor working masses and subalterns (and agencies) to do in the meantime? What should they hope for while they wait for the slate to be cleaned of colonial constructs? Are we better equipped to answer the main issue concerning subalterns, that is, how to better their lives, by pondering over the philosophical question of differences only?

It is in the light of these questions that we should start rethinking the relevance of subaltern studies so that it can be restored to its original context that is, creating an emancipatory politics. We should not waste time in finding out if the Yellow River (coming back to our exchange mentioned in the beginning), or reality, exists in our minds or outside autonomously, because the river of historical forces, such as transnational capital would not wait for our answers and all of us would be swept away under its force. If we really believe in the source of agency then we should not allow the historical forces to subsume us but truly take charge of our lives and act now in making our own history as we please, before it is too late.

References:

1. Bahl, V. (2003) 'Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies' in David Ludden (ed.) *Reading Subaltern Studies*, New Delhi : Orient Blackswan
2. Bardhan, K. (1990) *Of Women, Outcaste, Peasants and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*, California and London: University of California press, pp.24.
3. Collu, G. (1998) 'Speaking with Mahasweta Devi: interviewed by Gabrielle Collu', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, (33,2) pp.147-8.
4. Devi, M. (2002) *The Book Of The Hunter* (translated by Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta), Calcutta: Seagull.
5. Salgado, M (2000) 'Tribal stories, scribal worlds: Mahasweta Devi and the unreliable Translator', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, (35,1) pp. 131-3.
6. Spivak, G.C. (1993a) 'More on power/knowledge', *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.46.
7. Spivak, G.C. (1993) *Imaginary maps*, Calcutta: Thema.

Book: Breast Stories. Author: Mahasweta Devi. Publisher: Seagull Books, 1997. Genre: Fiction. A review of Devi's work is futile unless one first gains an understanding of her ideology. A snippet from an interview with her publisher gives a precious glimpse into her psyche, in which she declared with brutal honesty "I often say that my world is divided between two things- the needful and the needless." Mahasweta Devi's work uniquely stands out in the sea of popular fiction of this day. Her writing has little to do with the petty everyday idiosyncrasies of the privileged; she shuns the needless or the unnecessary. In her matter-of-fact no-rhetoric writing one sees no romanticism in the plight of women who are most directly and drastically affected by the patriarchy.