

A VIEW OF RARELY SEEN INDIA IN THE COLLECTION OF *FIVE PLAYS* BY MAHASWETA DEVI

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Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system. (Devi x)

In a view of rarely seen India, Mahasweta Devi emphasizes the importance of human lives and love for humanity. She advocates for the transformation in the present social system and laws; she sees the transformation is the only way to mainstream marginalized and down trodden people. She finds major loop holes in the political and administrative systems which disable to complete their duties and responsibilities towards common and marginalized people. She says loudly that life is not a calculation in number or any game. It is larger than we expect and richer than we imagine.

India is a land of rich and glorious tradition of Drama and folk cultures. Drama is a powerful medium to share the experiences of life and Indian drama comprises elements of myths, folktales, legends and cultures. The tradition of drama is traced right from the Vedic period with special connection to Ntayahashtra by Bharat Muni. In this context, R. K. Dhawan says, "India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic period. As a manifestation of our national sensibility, Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly hailed as "Fifth Veda", (R.K. Dhawan and V.K Reddy 4).

In India, Drama has been considered equally important as Vedas and specified as Fifth Veda. Drama is a very effective and powerful medium to catch and hold the attention of common readers and spectators. For this reason, it is included under the category of DrishyaKavya. Drama sketches not only stories but life with the employment of dramatic techniques; stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. Indian drama in English is one of the important branches of literature. Indian drama in English is not very prosperous and refine in the standard. K.R.Srinivasalyenger points dissatisfaction, "it is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality" (Iyenger 226)

The first play *Is this Called Civilization?* in English was written in 1871 by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Drama in English has largely invited the attention of urban writers who have frequently dealt with language, technique and presentation. Iynger has rightly remarked about the class of the writers, "the super sophisticated who live in the cities and the larger towns, in Universities or in certain Government offices or business houses" (Iyenger 236)

M.K.Naik has observed the very intrinsic nature of drama, “Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience”(Naik 151) For the dramatization, the living theatre and live audience are required, to represent the living experiences of lives. Drama is not just a form of writing, one hand it composes experiences of common mass and other hand reveals the subtle emotions on the stage.

Mahasweta Devi has always been experimentalist in her writing, approach and action of life. Her bold overtone in mainstreaming of marginalized and underdogs are infused in the collection of *Five Plays*. She is less concerned with art for art’s sake in her writing. She writes to expose the ground reality of life and to suits to the demand of underprivileged. She infuses history largely in writing and says, “the history of the past and the history of the present ...constitute history...but there are some histories that are for all times” (Devi ix). The history here she refers to the tales of exploitation of innocents and functioning of exploitative government and official mechanisms which robe humanity and humiliated innocents.

“With the history of exploitations in various forms, she chooses playwriting as a medium to reach the large illiterate audience. Evidently drama is not her forte, but she has chosen, “slightly different form, with songs and rituals and evocations providing a historical field for the action.” (Devi xv)

Her agenda of writing plays was very obvious to her and SamikBandyopadhyay observes, “Mahasweta’s plays in the early 1970’s confronted Indian mainstream theatre with a challenge- the challenge of an experience revealed- that the theatre failed to take up.” (Devi xx)

Drama, theatre and performance art forms have given new venture to writers like Mahasweta Devi to rediscover identity, impotence and pride of tribals and subalterns. She has depicted a view of India rarely seen in the collection of *Five Plays*. The collection comprises translations of *Mother of 1084*, *Ajir*, *Urvashi* and *Johnny*, *Bayen* and *Water*. This collection is translated by SamikBandyopadhyay with the addition of substantial introduction and acknowledgement. The collection has represented the rarely seen life of India and Bharat, urban and rural, upper and lower class. India is a country of diversity in unity in folk cultures, art, customs and traditions. The same bright, rich and versatile India has the dark side of poverty, gender inequality, slavery, caste system, untouchability, patriarchy, hunger, starvation, suppression of democratic rights and innocent exploited mothers. Post independent India has forgotten the history of socially deprived, marginalized, subaltern people with the wake of big city cultures and colonized mindset. Forgotten tales of underclass people are either misrepresented or intentionally excluded from the mainstream to centralize power in the hands of the elite class, caste system and class system to sustain the exploitative structure of colonized time period. She has shown the deepest concern and interest for all the section of society in the collection of *Five Plays*. She is entirely different from her contemporary dramatists in the dealing of subject matter as unromantic and representation of life without any façade.

The first play in the collection, *The Mother of 1084* is a story of apolitical mother Sujata and her son Brati. It first appears in Bengali *HazarChurashi Ki Ma*, a novel, in the special autumn festival issue of periodical, *Prasad* in 1973. Devi has translated the novel into play in 1972-73 when Asit Bose planned to stage it. In this play, she has portrayed the horrific situation during Naxalite movement in urban Bengal. The play deals with the odd and inhuman experiences of many families of then and the aftermath of Naxalite movement which propelled

many young men, women and families of youngsters to martyrdom, who were part of the movement in one way or another way. The leading character Sujanta and her son, both become the victim of the male-dominated society, where a father is unsympathetic and unable to associate with his deceased son and his identity. The denial of recognizing the death of a revolutionary son makes his father, Dibyanath, conscious of his status and dignity in the elite class. The social pressure of belonging to the elite class builds a kind of wall between lower class and upper-class people which denies connectivity and lacks association with valuable human emotions. Brati was a fighter and protector for the cause of poor people, the boy joined Naxalite Movement in his youth and killed during the police operation.

The event becomes havoc for the family and brought ill reputation to Dibyanath in the society. Sujata was aware of the corrupt and degenerated values represented by her husband; she fails to fit herself in the frame and ideology of Dibyanath and his society, it leads her to alienate from him and other family members who are well versed with the tone of Dibyanath and his ideology of elite class. She thinks that the human society, given itself to the pleasures of the modern world, is devoid of human qualities. Hence, the noble sacrifice like that of Brati's is in vain. The search for her son leads to the realization of her own being as mother, woman and human being. Sujata's veils on her failure to know real self of Brati, "Brati, I spent the whole of the day with you, and I can't forget myself to carry out my duties." (31)

In the final episode, the collapse of Sujata symbolizes the outburst of anger and revolt against the patriarchy. The story shows the utter helplessness of an urban elite class mother, who can cry on the death of her son, but can't bring the matter into day light, it can spoil the fake reputation of a father and can shake the foundation of his built empire and fake ideologies.

The second story in the collection is 'Ajir'. 'Ajir' is the story of an ancestral bonded labour slavery and exposes the dehumanization, humiliation and oppression of the bonded labour system. This is an unseen picture of rural life India. Mahasweta Devi's major effort is to reveal the old tradition of exploitative institutions. She has raised her voice for the darker side of Bharat. The bonded labour system is emerged out of Varna (caste) system. The varna system is categorized in the four classes; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Among the varna system, Shudras is the most marginalized section and deprived of education, right to property and choices for occupation.

Even in the twenty first century, the bonded labour system does exist and a larger exploiter groups feed upon the energy and life of innocent people. According to N.D.Kamble:

"In practice, bonded labour in India is the culmination of the debtor-creditor relation into slave and master relation. But the bonded labour is an outcome of socio-economic system prevailing in India. Some people who were deprived of the socio-economic and political powers had to depend on those who enjoyed these powers. Criminal poverty of vulnerable sections exposed them to exploitation in the built-in mechanism of the socio-economic system. Economics dependence and poverty of the under-privileged sections of the society forced them to be slaves" (Kamble 3)

The Protagonist Paatan belongs to the family of slaves and is denied of the right to love and marriage. He was not allowed to live an ordinary life like others. Bonded labours seem merely as a puppet in the hands of owner to follow their commands. They are completely devoid of human wishes and desires for life. His mistress allures him to set free from the bonded labour system in lieu to quench her lust. Eventually, Paatan decides to free himself from the bondage and accepts the proposal of a mistress. In the course of an attempt to free himself, he kills

mistress. Surprisingly he comes to know that there is no longer a slave and like everyone he is free.

The third story in the collection of play is ‘Urvashi O Johnny’. It is a play of a social realism. K.A. Abbas observes social realism, “is the acute awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of men and women and overall interaction of individuals and society” (Abbas 146). Social realism as a tool of theatrical stylization has interested to Mahasweta Devi for her play. It is a technique which enabled her to dramatize events and pass on apt commentaries wherever required for the impact on the audience. Social realism technique is adopted to reveal the reality of urban elite of Calcutta.

Johnny, a ventriloquist by the profession is an orphan protagonist in the play who dreams of bringing change to convert the mundane world into a paradise of happiness by his efforts and tricks. The play reflects light on the lives of artists and their creative efforts to bring harmony, happiness and peace in the society. Like Brati of the Mother of 1084, Johnny is also after the role of crusader for human rights and betterment. Johnny, in spite of being aware of his insecure social status, is committed to the cause of the suffering and struggling masses. He wants the people to realize that “happiness is the greatest jewel one can find in life” (75)

The fourth play in the collection is Bayen. Bayen, firstly appeared as a short story in 1971. Chandidasi is the leading character in the play; she belongs to the descent of Kalu Dom. By profession, she is a gravedigger and inherited her profession from ancestors. Her job is to bury the dead children and protect them from jackals in the night. Chandi has no complaint with her profession before marriage, but marriage brings change in her life and feelings towards her job. She refuses to continue the job after getting blessed with a boy child. Her motherly intense feeling doesn’t allow to see the faces of dead children. She is very loving for her child and the same feeling nourishes her emotions and softens her heart to continue the profession of gravedigger. She converses with her husband Malinder in this context for her unwillingness to continue, but he denies and pays no serious attention the tender feelings of his wife and mother of his child Bhagirath. Chandi had never been inclined to enter into this profession but the obligation of ancestors bothered her to take up this job to continue the tradition of the descent. She was bound to continue profession in her village to pay regard to ancestors, but her idea of changing dwelling can liberate her from this job. She requested to her husband, but his unconcern attitude and Chandi’s firmness of leaving profession throws her in trouble. She was branded as a witch. She becomes a prey of patriarchy which either forces her to continue the job or surrender herself to branded as a witch. The sense of denial for the traditional profession is seen a violation of law in the community. A woman is not free to take her decisions in her life according to her situation and requirements. Chandi is branded as Bayen; “a Bayen she’s no longer human”(102). She was devoid of all human passions, basic needs of life and shelter, She was abandoned by her husband under the pressure of patriarchy and he buries his immense love in the corner his heart for Chandi. Malinder, the lover, partner, and husband of Chandi was not a strong man, he surrenders in front of society and patriarchy instead of protecting Chandi. Chandi shares her agony, “Men in general are so insensitive”(106)

A woman branded as a witch and possessed, has more power and courage to rescue the lives of people just for humanly love and affection, but society and patriarchy were unable to recognize her as a human being. The disparity against women is not a new practice; it damages sensitive feelings, images of women and subordinates or reduces them to insignificant to address their denial or urges. They are merely projected as a means to satisfy the means of patriarchy or to serve as subordinate without any demand or need. She sacrifices her life to save others, but her

husband didn't acquire courage to recognize her wife out of fear of patriarchy. But her son, Bhagirath, accepts his relation with Chandi and claims her dead body. The act of Bhagirath is relief for sensitive hearts and challenge for insensitive system towards women. He says, "...my mother, the late ChandidasiGangadasi, Sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother" (122)

The last play in the collection is *Water*. The play first appeared in the form of a short story and in the second phase of her writing, Mahasweta Devi has changed the form of the short story and made it play. She has tried to expose the inhuman treatment of ruling class people to the lower class. She is acquainted with the heart rendering plight of innocent folks by the hands ruling, feudal class to exploit natural and human resources. This play bears the tone of social protest and demand for the essential facilities of life for innocent, illiterate people.

Maghai, Dome, is the central character in the play who belongs to the marginalized and exploited section of the society, this section is thrown on the margin from the ages and made powerless to be exploited. His job in the play is to spot the water recourses for the digging up of new wells. Maghai borrows the tradition of his forefathers to locate the geological spots for water resources. Magahai, Paatan and Chandi are the in the conflict with the feudal and oppressive systems which deprives them of the fulfilment of basic needs of life. Magahai and his community was trapped by tricks of Santosh babu, he stores huge amount of relief material meant for poor and creates artificial feminine in the village. He denies untouchables to draw water from the well and forces them to join his slavery and bonded labour system. The irony of fate is depicted very well in the play. Maghai, the man who is a water diviner, is not able to provide water to his own community and people. His skill has become curse form him, it leads to him utter frustration and helpless state. He is not allowed to employ his skill for the welfare of common mass.

Finally, the school teacher, Jiten touched by the miserable plight of villagers and Maghai, decides to devote himself to uplift them and encourages Maghai to build a dam across the river Charasa. But the situation takes an opposite turn; Santosh informs police that untouchables have become Naxalites and Jiten is the main leader and scheme maker and conspirator against state and government. Towards the end of the play, Santosh babu wins his intention and suppresses the efforts of untouchables to liberate themselves from the slavery, inhuman treatment and his clutch. Police demolish the dam and arrests untouchables. Demolition of dam symbolizes that the powerful people and community plays all tricks and exercises power to eradicate even a singular effort of revolt by marginalized to liberate themselves. Law and administration are unable to cease such anti-social powerful moneylenders; these powerful people are backed up by ministers to multiply money unethically and protected for malpractices against marginalized people. SDO expresses his helplessness to Jiten, "Laws are made because they have to be made. They're never enforced. The laws have abolished agricultural debt; the system of bonded labour is banned. But what do you find in reality?" (173) The system is made to establish equality and bring peace, but in practice, a fist of people polarizes power in their hands by making structures from bottom to top in the system. Administrators are recruited to enforce laws, but they become powerless in front of such powerful moneylenders and politicians.

The collection has touched the sensitive chords from the urban to rural life of India. These issues were not addressed with such intensity and in-depth details as done by Mahasweta Devi. Sujata, Paatan, Johny, Chandidasi and Maghai are from the different community, society and belief systems. But the commonality among them is that they all are the victim of the system and social unjustified codes. Mother either from urban or rural life or from higher or lower class

is the victim of patriarchy. An artist, bonded labour and common lower class man are also the victim of patriarchy, caste and class system. Mahasweta Devi believes that human beings born with equal rights but marginalized on the basis of socially constructed systems of gender, law, class and caste. Rarely authors dare to represent the dark side of modern, postcolonial India. After reading of these stories, one can say that reality is bitter but undeniable in the case of invisible India. One has to go deep into Bharat to know the reality.

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