

EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS FROM MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'BREAST STORIES' AND 'RUDALI': A CRITICAL STUDY

¹Mr V. Arun

¹Assistant Professor

¹Department of English,

¹Sri Sathya Sai Arts and Science College, Kollam, Kerala, India

Abstract : *Literature has long been serving as an essential element that bestowed predominantly upon the philosophical views of how life operates within the constraints of socio-political interventions. Many literary veterans have stirred the readers' mind through their revelation of social imperfections and hegemony that has crippled the society. With the advent of modernity and post-colonial reformation in India had a scaffolding impact on the burgeoning literary growth which paved the way for Indian English Literature for addressing on various social flaws that are hindering the lives of the millions, who are facing existential agony and marginalization which has been the very cancer in our society which remains persistent for several centuries.*

The aid from some of the eminent minds from the field of literature has taken these issues into their shoulders. Among these great personalities, the contributions of Mahasweta Devi cannot be neglected, as her works were directly addressing the 'Marginalization' of women and the oppressed classes. Apart from her vast literary prowess, her activist impulse and compassion towards socially oppressed classes appears beyond our description to contemplate. The protagonists in her works are being pushed to the very extent of existential agony and distress by the elitist society, fighting back for their rights and rising above their hegemonic rulers or accept their fate and live their entire life under grief and desolation. This paper explores the 'existential authenticity' in select works of Mahasweta Devi.

IndexTerms - *Existential Crisis, Post-Colonial Reformation, Social Imperfections, Marginalization*

The term 'Existentialism' could be widely observed under the philosophical standpoint, as it has wider array of meanings and interpretations. The terminology was initially coined by French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. However the term acquired a definitive meaning in the latter phase of the 20th century. Existentialism is regarded under the philosopher's outlook as humans tend to 'exist' without any sort of meaning or definition or an 'essence', as it is only his counterpart succeeds in creating a sense of meaning or essence for defining him/herself to the social world. Therefore from the existential standpoint, humans are constantly toiling themselves to construct their presence among the society (Terry, 45).

Humans pursue their transcendent aims to exist through their actions, ensuring that they self-surpasses and grasp onto their objectives and ideals. However this created a sense of tension and angst among individuals who fails to succeed. The existential crisis is one of the major issues that consumed millions of people's life over the years. Existential individuals are regarded as those who are consistently making their choices and facing treachery, turmoil and disparity among the public as they failed in their pursuit of seeking freedom and self-identity.

Existentialists are being abandoned as a result of socio-cultural norms that were framed by elitists in belittling people belonging under specific classes. The oppressions are inhuman in nature, pushing their lives to thrive within the existential sphere of agony and distress. The resultant outcome of these excluded minorities who are exploited under the iron fist of elitists over the years has affected their livelihood, as they are thoroughly neglected from participating in the socio-economic and political aspects of the society in which they hail for survival. Throughout the phase of Indian history, the modes of exploitation and oppression of the marginalized has been witnessed throughout the nation. The post-colonial studies became a part of subaltern studies, serving as the rudimental element in depicting marginalized groups with assistance from some of the greatest contemporary artists of Indian literature (Deloughrey et al., 136).

Among those contemporary legends who has emanated these social concerns into limelight, Mahasweta Devi's works showcased an extraordinary benefaction of sacrificing more than six decades of her life, by working tirelessly both as a women novelist, whose major theme involving with existential crisis, subaltern, Marxian and feministic ideologies and also as an activist trying to resolve social stigmas and issues through her humanitarian approach. Mahasweta Devi fought in front line for the marginalized women and class oppressed groups. In the following subsections in the paper, we will study the aesthetic usage of English and writing style of Mahasweta's work on the play

II. MAHASWETA DEVI: THE NOVELIST WHO BROKE THE BARRIERS OF EXISTENTIAL AGONY THROUGH HER ACTIVISM AND LITERARY WORKS

Mahasweta's writings as a novelist were basically the representation of a woman's voicing on her societal concerns and her expression of humanitarian outlook by exposing the bitter truths of elitists' rule. Through her fictional works, she tries to convey her angst over the muted and marginalized groups. Her writings try to articulate the gender biased subaltern issues and empowering the impoverished. Besides her mastery in usage of English as a mode to place her predilection through texts for inspiring the readers and to embrace the aesthetical portion in her works, she focuses more towards revealing the thematic portion to kindle their hearts and soul through fictional narratives.

When observing all of her illustrious works, the novel's plots were quite intense and have been deeply theorized on the ground level towards conveying powerful social concerns which remained unaddressed, as it centralizes on the sociopolitical aspects. All her protagonists in her works were just the representation of the existential individuals and their hardships in this contemporary world. Their treatment as an outcast in their own country, tries to render a clear knowledge regarding these unexplored entities in our current society. Her deliberate depiction of dehumanized practices, injustice, torturous and hegemonic approach of the elitist's dominion was brought into the daylight (Azim, 4).

Her brilliancy in manifesting historical relationship of marginalization enlightens the reader's perception towards understanding subordinated people from the pages of elitist's historians. Mahasweta is an ardent believer of subaltern studies, which provides the foundation for understanding the intricacies of minorities quite extensively. Using symbolism and fictional counterparts as the medium for propagating her theme, Mahasweta was triumphant throughout her life, as her mode of writing and approach has clearly left a lasting impact in the social reforms from her part. The delineation of existential crisis in the works of Mahasweta Devi is explored in the current work delving deeper into the agony and distress that were faced by the protagonists in the story. The study dissects the existential spheres in each of the works and exposes the bitter social reality in which our current contemporary society has entrapped.

III. DELINEATION OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S SHORT STORIES: 'BAYEN', 'DRAUPADI' AND 'BREAST GIVER'

Among Mahasweta's ingenious works, the Bengali writer was critically acclaimed for her short stories entitled: 'Breast Stories'. 'Breast Stories' is a series of short stories of Mahasweta, were developed as an actual outcome of representing the obnoxious societal treatment of the 'existential beings' who were branded as a dispensable part of society. She tried to relate the contemporary realities into the fictional realms through short stories. Draupadi: Breast-giver mainly deals with the context of 'marginalized individuals', especially womenfolk. 'Breast' being the primary theme on all of her short stories acts as a metonymical representation for each story. In this particular case, breast indicates a source of commodity, by which Mahasweta harshly illustrates the unfair treatment which exists in our social system.

These stories explored the different modes of existential crisis that are grounded under different scenarios, representing on how an individual were cornered and marginalized under the Machiavellian tendencies that has still been persisting in contemporary time, thus the stories unravel the greyer portions which remained unnoticed and guised within the facets of democracy.

Bayen

Similar to Mahasweta's previous plays, Bayen joined its predecessors of being dramatized after its success as a short story. The story's plot unravels the frightening truths whirling in a tide of exploitative and inhuman behavior which engulfs the marginalized category to succumb to pursue their lives within the existential space. Besides the story's depiction on various aspects of social downfall concerning with indigence and enslavement of rural community, Mahasweta's thematic representation on 'woman marginalization' serves as a major feature of the play, as it chiefly explores the atrocious act of oppression on the basis on gender, as women were left to constantly battle the impending odds for their sustenance.

Similar to Mahasweta's 'Mother of 1084' the story is very much pertained towards a mother who is stranded under the complex machinations of the society through deception of vested interests. The protagonist Chandidasi Gangadasi is imposed to leave her family; both her son and husband, as she is allegedly accused for being 'Bayen'. The term Bayen represents a woman who breastfeeds dead children of the village and is believed that such individuals have the power to curse others. With an air of fear and agitation covering the entire village, the villagers decided to imprison Chandi, rather than killing her in a hut which is situated nearby to the railroad tracks. This particular play of Mahasweta tries to emphasize over the metamorphosis of woman who belongs to a working class to a marginalized individual who has been branded as a woman of witchcraft. She was cut from all her societal connections, as a result of social stigmas and beliefs.

Mahasweta has craftily displayed the existential crisis and agony through her depiction of Chandi's personality in the story, who is a gravedigger by profession. She buries and guards the carcasses of the children. Chandi's marriage with Malinder Gangaputta marks the dawn of misery and distress clouding her life. She works with her husband in morgue and takes care of the graves at night. After Chandi giving birth to her son Bhagirath turned the attention of the villagers. After her accusation of Chandi as bayen, has broke her mental stability into shreds. The novel tries to incorporate the intricacies concerning with the existential agony and loneliness felt by the mother who longs for the warmth and comfort of her son. Besides the negligence expressed by the villagers, Malinder's mixed feeling of both disgust and fear over Chandi represents, how a woman who is pushed within the existential realms has been characterized in the society, even by her own husband.

BAYEN(turns around in yearning disbelief): Bhagirath? My Bhagirath? Bhagirath MALINDER (ferocious in his fear): Stop it, you bitch! Turn your face away. (*The Bayen dutifully turns away.*) You want to kill me? Is that why you're here Eh?

BAYEN (*covers her eyes shivers and cries*): No, No, No (Devi, 96).

This particular instance clearly relates how a woman is branded as 'bayen' is treated, which evidently showcases the hardships imposed on marginalized woman in the society. The conglomeration of isolation, alienation and motherhood can be observed in Chandi's departure from her family, as she admits

"I can't bear it alone through the night" (Devi 2011: 100).

Amidst the battle between superstitious beliefs and motherhood, the societal implications of beliefs overshadowed Chandi's affection for Bhagirathi, vanquishing the humane nature which has been existing in the society. The dominance of superstition in society separates Chandi from Bhagirath, her son neglecting her motherhood and deserting happiness forever.

Chandi sings: "Come, sleep, come to my bed of rags, My child god sleeps in my lap ..." (Devi 2011: 97).

This shows her love and motherly affection towards her son which is inarguably blissful than any relationship in the world. However her attachment and happiness were burnt down into flames in the latter half of the story. Chandi could relate the treachery, she has been facing, as she longed for the lost relationships she had before labeling her as Bayen

“When I hadn’t become a Bayen, I had everybody” (Devi 2011: 97).

In order to cope up with her life filled with misery and hardships, Chandi dreamed of the memorable pasts which she cherished as a mother ailed her poor soul to pass yet another miserable night in solitude.

Draupadi

Draupadi, the main protagonist of the story is a young tribal woman of Bengal fighting a war on behalf of her tribe who were marginalized and oppressed under governmental policies. The story contemplates over the barbaric approaches which were carried out by the government by trying to impose their oppressive tactics to an extent where the bureaucrats end up with the lowliest act of kidnapping, raping and seizing one’s basic amenities to impose their hegemonic norms over the subalterns. Mahasweta’s writings impelled directly over the ‘Marxist feminist’ ideology. Draupadi, also known as Dopdi Mehjen, was captured and gang-raped when she was under the custody of villainous Senanayak. After being tortured and turned her into a mere pulp by their men, the nasty wounds inflicted on her breasts turned into counter-offensive. In this particular instance, breast is a symbol of ‘woman’s erotic portion’ on a wider perspective was reduced to an extent, where it was treated as an instrument of backlash and torture, inflicted over the rebellious subaltern woman who fights for rights and welfare of her people.

Other than the story’s theme over the gender biased violence, the historical counterparts of the unending conflicts faced by the marginalized subjects for gaining their essential rights which were stripped from them through sociopolitical dominion exerted by the elitists. When the marginalized were pushed to a level where they’re deprived from food and water led them to revolt. This version of resistance literature of Mahasweta tries to delve deeper into the ugly reality of imperialist tendency over the subaltern groups:

“Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhum, Murshidabad and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous Operation Bankura, when three villages were cordoned off and machine gunned, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper caste wells and tube wells during the drought, not surrendering those three young men to the police. (Devi 2010: 19-20)

After the capture of Dopdi and her husband’s death, Senanayak’s conception of breaking the mind and soul of Dopdi through inflicting a violent sexual assault through his men was his final reserve. With an intention over subjugating Dopdi through breaking her body and soul by the repeated raping of Senanayak’s men, expresses the persisting hegemony and animalistic nature in contemporary world:

“Again the process of making her begins. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains...a compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall rise and fall over it...” (Devi, 35).

Being pummeled into monstrous acts of sex and violence, she never felt a sense of shame or fear in her mind. She encountered Senanayak, even in the disfigured condition of her naked body, as she approached with every ounce of energy which resides in her to make one last attempt to exhibit her resilience against the hegemonic subjugation:

Naked Draupadi stands before him. He saw that her thigh and the hair below the lower part of abdomen tangled with dry blood. The breasts were having two wounds. She laughed before Senanayak and said: “The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up; don’t you want to see how they made me?”. Draupadi’s black body comes closer to him. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Wiping the blood, she asked: “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?”. She spat the bloody spittle on the white bush shirt of Senanayak and said that why she should be ashamed because there was not even a single man there: “What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me?” (Devi, 1997:36-37).

This particular social representation of Mahasweta has directly voiced the concerns, angst and the resistance which resides within the life of a marginalized. Her voicing over these matters, remain unanswered by the society, leaving behind an indelible scar in the readers mind, wounding the conscience of a citizen whose allegiance to liberal democracy was left to debate.

Rudali

Rudali portrays the treacherous and miserable life of Dalit community, who are being subjected under existential crisis for several centuries in our country. Mahasweta Devi has elegantly handled Dalit literature with representing the existential agony that is faced by these marginalized classes by the elitists. The protagonist of the novel ‘Sanichari’ encountered a cascade of mishaps which surmounted her life with downfalls and distress, falling prey to feudal system, bonded labor system and religious based disparities. The death in her family caused a sequence of hapless events with each member leaving the wretched world by the cruel ploy of the elitists.

The deaths involved her to follow a set of religious ‘kriya’ ceremony. The ceremony explored ritualized system of religion has become the source of exploitation of the poor and a source of income for the exploiters. Mahasweta Devi links it with the bonded labour system. She shows the three angles which are connected with each other- religion with poverty and poverty with bonded labour system. The death of Bikhni shatters Shanichari. Her death leaves her as shrewd and manipulative. Mahasweta Devi describes each and every emotion through their friendship. She projects each aspect of exploitation through different systems showing in ‘Rudali’. Like any other Indian village, Thahad is also characterized by the presence of caste system and feudalism. Caste becomes a determining factor of the life of the people of Thahad. Sanichari, the central character of the story, is an untouchable by caste. Rudali presents an obnoxious picture of the domestic life of the elite classes.

It, besides revealing the pettiness of the upper class life, exhibits the extravagant manner they waste money on funerals. In the story, admittedly, Sanichari gets empowered by means of the negation of there salient role ascribed to her as well as her community by the establishment. In the process, she learns to manipulate the very system that seeks to ostracize her. By refusing to be subservient, she comes to enjoy a relative independence from the strangle hold of the system. *Rudali* offers a powerful critique of the contemporary Indian social

reality by exhibiting the dire poverty of the subalterns, their persistent struggle to eke out a living in an oppressive milieu, their occasional gestures of self-assertion and their resistance to the encroachments by the dominant castes/classes.

She knew that as long as the masters needed the rudalis to show off their pomp and snob, she, being a professional, was in demand. The Dalits were trapped within the existential spheres of elitist's dominion as the subaltern's condition over oppression and misery as stated in the phrase below:

'Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out. over and over, 'food. give me food!' It was pouring that night. Sanichari and her sister-in-law lowered the old woman on to the ground. If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn't even a cupful of grain in the house! So Sanichari was forced to go from neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain.' (Rudali, 55)

By contextualizing the locale and characters at the very outset of the story Mahasweta concedes no space for any other assumptions attributed to their desperate condition. The latter half of the story presents Sanichari as an empowered subaltern who is determined to manipulate the unfriendly system to her end. Sanichari is seen to haggle with the account keepers for better payment for their job:

"[T]he way we'll weep and wail, huzoor, we'll drown out even the chant of Ram's name! for five rupees and rice. On the day of the kriya ceremony we'll take cloth and food. Nothing more, nothing less, and if you need more rudalis, we'll arrange it." (74)

The haggling shows that she is wavering in matters concerning her subsistence. She began to demand different tariff for performing her labour such as:

"wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka, wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikkas." (75)

IV. CONCLUSION:

The research attempted to explore the spectacular creations of Mahasweta Devi's short stories 'Breast Stories' and Novella 'Rudali'. The paper delved deeper into the crux of marginalization of woman and caste based oppression. However, the approach and mode of delivery in both of these novels differs entirely. Bayen imparts woman marginalization on the grounds of 'superstitious beliefs' and 'social stigmas' as a reflection to the historical counterparts, since the practice of accusation of women witchcraft remained prevalent during the darkest periods of our nation. It was the time our nation thrived for enlightenment and redemption. There are certain witnesses over this practice in the contemporary timeline, which kindled Mahasweta to offend on such miserable societal practices from the rural community and eliminate their existence on ground level. In the case of Draupadi, the novel seems to deal with an entirely different perspective of social menace in the form of hegemony, class/gender based oppression. In Rudali, she describes the existential agony and distress which were faced by Dalits. The death of Bikhni shatters Shanichari. Her death leaves her as shrewd and manipulative. She projects each aspect of exploitation through different systems showing in 'Rudali'. Through these, she raises the issues of bonded slavery, naxalism, corruption, poverty, exploitation, feudalism and caste-discrimination which are deeply rooted in Indian soil. Mahasweta has brilliantly conveyed her thematic depiction of marginalization in a well-rounded fashion. Even after her demise from the physical world, her contributions for the 'upliftment of marginalized' and creating awareness among the public masses, both as an activist icon and literary legend, will exist till the end of humanity.

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