

Human Rights and Mahasweta Devi: A Study of her Short Stories

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's fictional works focus on the Tribal communities within the nation-state that is actually excluded from the socio-political-economic activities of the nation. These communities, completely deprived of all the human rights, are pushed to the conditions of faceless anonymity by the so-called mainstream nation, which either rejects their existence or affixes derogatory links to them.

The present paper will be a re-reading of a few stories written by Mahasweta Devi, (e.g. *The Hunt* and *Douloti, the Bountiful*) translated into English by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, from the perspective of human rights and the issues related to it, including development, particularly in the context of the tribal people of India. The study would evaluate the issues relating to human rights from social, cultural, political, economic and ethical standpoint.

Mahasweta Devi, the champion of Human and Civil rights, condemns the inhuman, barbaric, anti-democratic value-system of the establishment of Independent India that continues the colonial legacy of treating hundreds and thousands of subaltern people as born criminals. Her tales try to overturn the subtle political processes of the Indian nation-state that alienates the subaltern from the mainstream nation. She shows, in these stories of varying length, like most of her other fictional works, how almost all the rights, of the tribal people in India, as recognised by The International Bill of Human Rights, are grossly violated in the name of development. It is actually the development with targeted beneficiaries of people who are close to the establishment, at the cost of the rights of the tribals.

Index terms: Development, Human rights, nation-state, Mahasweta Devi, mainstream, subaltern, tribal.

Introduction:

Our overall conception of human rights is marked by the Right to Development since it integrates all economic, social and cultural rights, and also civil and political rights.

- Prof. Keba M'Baye, President of UN's Commission of Human Rights.

United Nations in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights has adopted 30 specific rights which every human being is entitled to enjoy. The Rights are as follows:

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.

(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12.

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13.

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.

- (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
- (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.
- (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.

- (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
- (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
- (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.

- (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
- (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20.

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21.

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23.

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
- (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26.

- (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27.

- (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29.

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Mahashweta Devi's fictional works focus on the communities within the nation-state that is actually excluded from the socio-political-economic activities of the nation. These communities, completely deprived of all the human rights, are pushed to the conditions of faceless anonymity by the so-called mainstream nation, which either rejects their existence or affixes derogatory links to them. In this paper we will re-read a couple of stories written by Mahashweta Devi, *The Hunt* and *Doulati, the Bountiful*, originally written in Bengali and translated into English by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, from the perspective of human rights and the issues related to it, including development, particularly in the context of the tribal people of India. Both the stories are based on true incidents of Mahashweta Devi's real life tribal experience and the locations and dates of these stories are precisely mentioned.

Shikar:

Shikar or *The Hunt* describes an incident that took place in 1977/78 at a place called Kuruda at Daltonganj in Bihar, now in Jharkhand. The story narrates how Mary Oraon, a Tribal girl of eighteen, kills Tehsildar, a non-tribal contractor who tries to grab her, insults her again and again on the day of the tribal women's animal hunting festival of Bihar which occurs once in twelve years. As the story progresses, Mahashweta Devi's narration goes on pointing out how the basic human rights of the tribal people are grossly violated. The tribals here, like almost everywhere else, are deprived of all the basic human rights like food, shelter, clothing, health and education and they are suffering from abject poverty. The Tehsildar, i.e. the contractor who in one hand gets the contract of cutting and selling of the logs of acres of Sal forest at an abnormally low rate, thanks to the ignorance and helplessness of Prasadji, the owner of the sal forest and on the other, engages the tribal people in this illegal assignment of deforestation at an ridiculously low wage, represents the mainstream Indian establishment. He has the support of the entire administration and this support, the right to equal protection of law, recognized both by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is completely absent for the poor tribals. Similarly, one can easily point out how the tribals in this story are deprived of a host of other human rights recognized by the United Nations and different Rights organisations. These tribal people have no right to information, as they are deliberately kept ignorant of the proper wage for the work they do. They have no right to work under favourable condition, no right to rest and leisure, no right to free trade unions.

Doulati :

The incidents of the story *Doulati, the Bountiful*, the second story under discussion today, took place at Palamu district at the then Bihar and now Jharkhand in the early 1960s. The first half of the story deals with Ganori Nagesia aka 'Crook' Nagesia, a 'kamiya' i.e. bonded slave in the house of Munabar Singh Chandela, the local Rajput landlord. It seems most of the people belonging to the Nagesias, the Dusads, the Ghasis and various other tribes of that locality had turned into bonded slave to the moneylender landlords, though slavery was declared illegal by the government. Mahashweta Devi describes in an impassioned and controlled language how Munabar punished Ganori by fixing him in place of an ox and whipping him to lift and pull the bullock cart full of paddy sacks. Ganori fell on his face, under the axle of the cart, hospitalized for three months, returned home broken, limping and newly christened as 'Crook'. This incident points out how almost all the human rights are mutilated by the main stream non-tribal power that is governing the so-called administration of the locality. Right to liberty and security of a person, right to protection against slavery, right to protection against torture and cruel and inhuman punishment, right to equal protection of law, right to access to legal remedies for right violations, right to hearing before an independent and impartial judiciary, right to work under favourable conditions, right to free trade union, right to rest and leisure, right to self-determination- all rights are grossly violated here. The subplot of Bono Nagesia's newly constructed house being burnt and destroyed by Munabar and Bono's being forced to take loan from Munabar himself, resulting into his becoming Munabar's bond slave points out to the violation of right to own property along with the violations of other rights listed above. All these violations of rights are only added to the obvious violation of other basic rights to food, clothing and housing, right to health care and social service, right to education and right to information. Mahashweta Devi also describes the 1961 census and 1962 general election that were conducted in this place along with the rest of the country. The way these democratic and development activities were conducted here is apparently funny, yet extremely grave as the poor tribal bond labourers, completely deprived of the rights to education and information, are completely unaware of the significance of the census and election. Right to nationality is also kind of violated here as these people are not even aware of the existence their country called India. Not only these poor tribal folks are deprived of all these human rights, they are completely unaware of these rights and they consider the violations of rights as God's rule and fate. The later half of the story deals with Doulati, the daughter Crook Nagesia, who were taken away by one Paramananda, another non-tribal on the assurance of marriage and then sold in the flesh market. The story ends with the death of Doulati, suffering from sexually transmitted disease on one independence day. Entire life of Doulati,

which ironically means ‘the bountiful’, is a series of deprivation of human rights. Mahashweta Devi says that this kind of incidents take place everywhere in India and as a remedy she says: “What we need is mass based public opinion formation, pressure on the government, vigilance.”

Conclusion:

Mahasweta Devi, the champion of Human and Civil rights, condemns the inhuman, barbaric, anti-democratic value-system of the establishment of Independent India that continues the colonial legacy of treating hundreds and thousands of subaltern people as born criminals. Her tales try to overturn the subtle political processes of the Indian nation-state that alienates the subaltern from the mainstream nation. She shows, in these stories of varying length, like most of her other fictional works, how almost all the rights, of the tribal people in India, as recognized by The International Bill of Human Rights, are grossly violated in the name of development. It is actually the development with targeted beneficiaries of people who are close to the establishment, at the cost of the rights of the tribal people. She says:

The tribals want to stay in the place which they know as their own. They want the respect that they hold for their dead ancestors. Whatever has come in the name of development has spelled disaster for the tribes. And they do not know how to dishonour others. Our double task is to resist ‘development’ activity and to learn to love. [Mahasweta Devi, in conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in December 1991]

