



Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*: Exploitation of the Marginalized

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Abstract

India's tribal individuals got tongue into Devi's essential concerns. She considers them to be individuals as significant of social persecution in India as of others but Devi has also utilized news coverage as a road for communicating her social concerns and for grassroots sorting out from the glimpse of the past. Being a champion of marginalized, Mahasweta Devi has powerfully depicted the deprivation and distress of those in the society who are not only muted but also murdered by the people of high class of the society who have continuously exploited labours. It was Mahasweta Devi who gave voice to the sufferings of labours. It is for this reason that Mahasweta has deliberately deviated from the beaten track of Bengali novel in her bid to tread new grounds which urgently needed the sympathetic attention of a sensitive creative artist.

Keywords: Dalit, Marginalization, Exploitation, Resistance movements

The contribution of Mahasweta Devi in Indian English literature has much more significance both in the terms of protest and resistance. Her development of thought for upgrading the downtrodden society and her magic portrayals of Dalits and tribal people make her so popular among the learners that she was recognized as one of the most widely translated Indian women writers who worked on the margin of Indian society. Through her literary criteria, Devi recreates a span of history by narrating satirical incidents against government policies, advanced people and heart rendering stories for the farmers, Dalits, tribal and invoiced students. Mahasweta Devi's writings whether they are fictions or non- fictions have been translated time and again into English which is enough to understand her thought of modernity and social upgradation. She has achieved a great literary fame among her readers both in India and the world of literariness and what ensures her on the apex of the modern Indian writers, is her sense of protest and resistance of the downtrodden people of India. In her writings, she focuses her creativity to provide a literary expression to the harsh realities of the poor as well as socio-political incidents and physical and emotional exploitation of these people in the context of modernity and post modernity by creating a platform for

Black women writers around the world. They are often seen continuously in struggle against caste, creed, racism, exploitation and other violations of human foundational rights.

Some of the protest and resistance movements are relevant to study Mahasweta Devi's short stories and the most important movement in relation to her short stories are the concerns of Dalit and Adivasis; who were on the margin of society. Such social and theoretical movements came into existence in order to escape from the social stigma and injustice that was prevailing in Indian caste system. Dalits or Adivasis expressed their anger and frustration through resistance and protest at the failure of policies in order to get rid of subjugation from the privilege created by upper class of society, aiming for enhancing education and upgrades of these untouchables, and finding a respected place for them within the concept of real Hinduism. In the opinion of the most powerful confessional voice in Indian English Literature, Kamala Das, "Mahasweta Devi... is a wonderful, fearless woman. She has learned of the tribals, she has lived with them, and she is dealing with material she's acquainted with." (Sharma, 163).

In the novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi portrays the life struggles of the Munda tribes to settle in a place, to lead a life out of forest products and agriculture resisting against the feudal oppressors during the colonial period and the political powers after independence. She delineates the tribal displacement, forced eviction from the forest lands they belong to and the feudal oppressions by the landlords making them as bonded labour, the introduction of new religions, education and occupation symbolize the imperialistic implied alteration of the natives from their own culture and also resemble the advent of the globalization in the modern times. This presses the Tribes to yield to the implicit subjugation shattering their unique culture to erase the tribal identity that is against the dominant cultural pattern in the politics of power and commodification. Not only the Tribes, but also the Hindu outcasts who undergo subjugation are drawn along with that of the tribe. With a clear cultural and social differentiation between the two groups is highlighted, they get united under one roof that is subjugation, poverty and bond labour having no lands of their own.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* we find the saga of Chotti Munda from the beginning of the twentieth century to the post emergency period of India. Actually, the novel projects the social position of the Munda, Oraon, Dusad, Dhobi, Kurmi communities and the novel also presents how these Adivasi communities like the Munda, Oraon and the lower caste Hindu untouchables like Dusad, Kurmi and Dhobi have been marginalized from mainstream socio- economic systems of India. The story of the novel commences with Purti Munda who was the great grandfather of Chotti Munda. Purti Munda came by Chotti River and settled there. Purti Munda had the experience that whenever he had gone, he found valuable metal there. So, upper class people like the 'Whites-Bengalis – Biharis' would come there to snatch the resources from the hand of the Munda. Such marginalization was found in the humble life of Purti Munda. Bisra Munda is the father of Chotti Munda. By the river Chotti they dwelt with other communities. The village is known as Chotti village. Rail station is constructed there. There were many neighbouring villages like Murudi, Kurmi, Khuntkatti, Tohri, Barn, Komandi, Sarahi, Dhutra, Chas. Chotti is under Tehar Police Station. Bisra Munda had two sons, named Chotti and Koel and a daughter, named Daski.

The humble Munda people live in Chotti by cultivating paddy, rye, maize, pepper, brinjal, squash plant, papayas, guavas and myrobalan. They also tend poultry and sell eggs in the market. They believed in Haramdeo and there was a Pahan (priest) in every village of Munda community. They respect Pahan and Pahani for their religious belief. They love the animal and birds of the forest surrounding the village. They do not hunt female animal. Chotti got married to Pahan's granddaughter and later Chotti became the father of three children – Harmu, Somchar and Sukhni. Koel got married to Mungri and they had a son, named Etwa. Chhagan, Parash, Sana, Donka, Motia Dhobin, Rupa, Jita lived together in the village. Chotti had learnt archery from Dhani Munda who was a Birsaita.

There was a popular belief that Chotti had magical arrow. This simple life has been prey of bonded labour from generation to generation. There was Lala Baijnath under whose authority the Munda, lower caste Hindu untouchables, and the Dhobi community work as bonded labour. So, they work but they do not get worthy money for their work. The poor people are impoverished by keeping the poor Mundas in the trap of bonded labour by the upper-class people like Lala Baijanath, Partap Chadha, the king of Narasingharh. They go to work in the field of the upper-class people and instead they do not get their proper wage. If any person of a family had taken a loan for crisis from the upper class, the tradition of giving bonded labour goes from generation to generation. Thus, they are doubly marginalized. Gaya Munda says – “Our heart's torn with givin' bond labour. And fines for everything” (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 97).

Exploitation of natural resources of the nation is widely persistent from the colonial to the postcolonial era. This has a strong impact on the lives of the tribe, the children of the forest whose lives have been purely based on the forest produce and the stony forest lands they clear to settle down with their folks. Their land is continually being occupied by the outsiders from the mainstream world in a notion of utilizing the natural resources for the nation's economy and to build their lives around it. This has pushed away the Tribes even to the remote places getting shrunk. The tribal displacement from their forest lands where they possess a sense of belonging is portrayed right from the opening passages of the novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. “However, remote the place he travels to, something will come out from under ground, immediately a big settlement will grow there. His Mundari world will shrink. He doesn't want anything, after all. A small village. All Adivasi, worshippers of God Haram. Followers of a priest, the Pahan” (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 1).

The central character Chotti's grandfather Purti Munda has faced the problems of dislocation and his efforts to settle in a place has gone in vain. The forced displacement of the Tribes from the centre to the margin has created a socioeconomic and psychological up- rootedness. This is shown through the characters Purti Munda, Dhani Munda in a manner that shapes the character of Chotti, the protagonist. The Tribal history retraced by the author in her fiction chisels the character Chotti to become a fictional legend used as a tool to re-establish the unsung revolution of the tribal folk in the past. This form of recognition attributing to the tribal identity that is introduced through translation to the global readers. Giving space to rewrite history with the historical events connected with the Tribes to resist against the forceful estrangement from their natural habitat giving the due recognition and identity they deserve.

The character of Purti Munda embodies the sufferings of displacement. The Tribes suffer as they are pushed to the extreme periphery by the mainstream people, whom he considers as the outsiders who are spoiling the forest, rivers and hills by exploiting the forest resource for their personal benefit without any ecological concerns in the materialistic world. Dhani Munda on the other hand stands as an epitome of a rebel following the revolutionary peasants and tribal revolts for acquiring the natural indigenous right over their forest lands to live a peaceful life. Mahasweta projects Dhani's longing for the salvation of his people as, "He went to all revolts in the hope that Mundas would establish villages in the forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace, and that other adivasi group would do the same" (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 11). Dhani teaches Chotti archery, the tribal skill showing their valour and a tool for their occupation hunting that can give a respectable identity for the Tribes. To him the Tribes studying the forest will need nothing from the outside world. Mahasweta reveals the tribal connection with the forest through Dhani Munda with her description, "He called the jungle Our Mother, Dhani said. Let me learn ye the jungle. ye won die starving". What isn't there in the jungle?" (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 11) This affirms the tribal culture closely knitted with the forest.

The protagonist Chotti is chiseled by the author who is able to identify how the adivasi's are perceived by the Colonizers as the savage groups turn dangerous if stimulated and the the upper caste Dikus (Hindus) as non-Indians even after independence. Devi points it as, "Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indians. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and independence, the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at distance and watch it all" (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 96). This questions the national identity of the adivasis. After independence, the government has created a ministry to serve the welfare of the Tribes yet their sufferings never stopped as the formulation of the law cannot find a proper implementation because of the role played by the local politicians is not for the welfare of the people but to secure the unrelenting power. To attain identity, Chotti finds a way through land as he says, "Be it barren, be it stony, a bit of land means tying one's drifting existence to an anchor" (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 147).

Chotti is made to witness the modernity entering the forest as it serves as the source of raw materials for industries through deforestation, industrialization and mining, it opens an opportunity for the non-adivasi contractors, moneylenders, Tea plantation recruiters to make money and to exploit the adivasi's and the Hindu outcasts labor at low cost as they work for their daily food. Through this the author projects Chotti's matured perception of their shared reality with the Dalits (Hindu Outcastes) as the subaltern oppressed and his acceptance of inevitability of change that alters their cultural identity as Gayatri Spivak opines it as a resistant subaltern solidarity to be together and to be anchored to their cultural roots as she highlights Chotti's words: "The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live with their identity." (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 290). Many youths like Dukhai, Bikha and Sukha from Kurmi village came to Chotti to learn archery so that they can show their worth in fair. Later Dukhai killed the manager of the King of Nakata. The manager, named Siaram exploited the local Munda to a great extent and even he showed audacity to them. He wanted more money from the local Munda. Dukhai could not tolerate this to make them financially more impoverished and hence he killed him. People spread

the rumour that Chotti taught them archery and so he had been able to kill the powerful man. Later Puran Munda killed a local agent. Budha Munda and Bharat Munda fought against the Diku. One day there was a brawl between the Munda people and the manager of Tirathnath. The gatekeeper of Tirathnath fired and it wounded a policeman in front of Daroga, the Station master and an Advasi officer, named Dilip Tarwe. So, the gate keeper was jailed but Harmu was also jailed because he was engaged in the protest. Harmu was punished without any criminal offence.

Mahasweta Devi believes that extraordinary history is created by ordinary men; therefore, in her writings we find common men fighting for a greater cause; a larger good, as exemplified in her novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a novel, remarkable for the manner in which it touches on the vital issues that have in subsequent decades, grown into matters of urgent social concern. It raises questions about the place of the tribal on the map of national identity, land rights and human rights, the 'museumization' of 'ethnic' cultures, and the justification of violent resistance as the last resort of desperate people, amongst others. Considered to be a seminal work of Mahasweta Devi, *Chotti Munda* deals with the subject close to Devi's heart- tribal mobilization and in her process of writing, she also succeeds in challenging the tribal stereotypes. The novel not only traces the journey of its central character, Chotti, from childhood to old age, who is a proud role model for the younger generations, but it also traces the changes some forced some welcome in the daily lives of a marginalized rural community.

Indeed, Mahasweta was passionate with an outstandingly deep 'social conscience' which urged and inspired her to probe deep into the problem of the tribal in many parts of India, although her committed activism was mainly confined to West Bengal. Mahasweta was aware about the sufferings, pain, agony and poverty of tribal. No wonder all her stories and novels are realistic reflections of the unrelieved and total tragedy to which these unfortunate men and women of the so-called low class were victims. She gradually matured into a master craftsman who could delve deep into human situation and psychology and powerfully portray the most painful condition of a section of society which suffered in silence as it did not have the power to vent its feelings to the rest of the world. But it was Mahasweta Devi who gave vent to the pent-up feelings of tribal through her writings which actually acted as an eye opener to most people of India who were either unaware of this crime against humanity or simple indifferent to their sad situation.

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