

Blending of Poverty and Poetry in Operation? BashaiTudu

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Abstract : Mahasweta's **Operation? Bashai Tudu**, 1978, is written in the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal from 1967-1977. In this distinguished novella she highlights the plight of the bonded and agricultural labourers in the hands of jotedars and moneylenders. What is more shocking is that the establishments also remain blind to such exploitation. In dealing with this realistic theme Mahasweta has also superbly expressed other side of her talent – the talent of a poet. It is really surprising how she juxtaposes lyricism and realism. The realistic matters like the jotedars and moneylenders denying the government approved minimum wage to the labourers, denying the tribals drinking water from their wells and such like are treated with first hand experience. With similar ease she imagines the flashing of Paltakudi village into sight with the flashing of lightning, the moving of clouds with the moving of kites in the sky, the swelling of the river Charsha in rain with a beggar woman needing few days' food to blossom in her womanly glory and such like. Critical study will be made to show how blending of poverty and poetry makes this work significant and unique.

Index Terms - labourer, jotedar, moneylender, lightning, cloud

Like **Right to the Forest** (*Arannyer Adhikar*), **Chotti Munda and His Arrow** (*Chotti Munda o Tar Teer*), **Operation? Bashai Tudu** is one of the distinguished pieces of Mahasweta Devi, the *Sabar Janani*, which deals with the poverty, hunger, exploitation, violence, and Government apathy in the life of the dispossessed and the disinherited Santals. But what is remarkable in **Operation? Bashai Tudu** is Mahasweta's streak of romanticism in dealing with the theme of hunger and poverty. In this novella, Mahasweta's lyricism has got supreme expression. When we read **Operation? Bashai Tudu**, we feel wonder-struck how the novelist juxtaposes lyricism and realism in the novella. **Operation? BashaiTudu** is a tragedy dealing with violence. Shakespeare's **Macbeth** is also a tragedy dealing with violence and in dealing with this theme Shakespeare's lyrical gift is also best expressed in some passages. To establish this point we can quote some lines from Banquo's speech after reaching Macbeth's palace,

‘ This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionary, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here : no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed, and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed
The air is delicate.’ (1. Vi. 3-10)

In this palace Duncan is murdered by Macbeth. In **Operation? Bashai Tudu**, violence takes place in the life of those who remain in the lap of nature as marginalized.

In order to forget the pain of physical torture from husband, Mato's mother had spent all money in drinking that she earned from selling handmade baskets in the fair. Being informed by Mato, 'Bashai is dying' in the forest of Charsha, Kali Santra secretly left his office for Charsha to meet Bashai. On his way to Charsha, Kali met Betul at late of night and saw him remaining awake from the pain in spine. Kali reached Mushai Tudu's house and met Bashai there. They had a lunch with *khesari* daal and rice. That night at Mushai's house they had pork for dinner. The whole night they talked about the infliction and torture that the Jotedars, moneylenders, administrative officials and political leaders had brought upon them. During the conversation at late hours of night 'Kali stood for a while at the door, staring into the liquid darkness spread out against the rainy night. A night in the lunar fortnight. A darkness penetrable. Kali could recall this night for long after. The village Paltakudi flashed into sight from time to time with the flashes of lightning. One could see far to the fields beyond the village. Paltakudi and Bakuli appeared like two islands in the sea of undulations created by the erosion of the soil. Beyond it all rose the roar of the canal flowing in the distance' (45). Such passage establishes Mahasweta's talent as a poet. We wonder how she imagines this way when writing about the sad tale of the poorest of the poor! In that time Kali felt, 'But the night was beautiful, something to remember for ever. With the rain, and the soil turning fertile. The soil

in her menstrual throes. In May the soil would be nurturing the seeds of paddy in her womb' (46). To feel nature this way is possible only for the great writers.

Bashai was telling Kali why he was maintaining distance from the Party. They were so absorbed in conversation that they were completely unaware of the passing of time. Rain stopped outside. Bashai told Kali to come out and go to the canal, 'Let's go out. It has stopped raining. There, look at the moon'(49). They were passing through Mushai's courtyard and Bashai told Kali that there would be more rain, 'Look at the clouds swirling overhead' (49). It was nearer to the dawn. He told Kali that there was an acute crisis of drinking water in the locality. The women had to scratch river sand by fingertips to collect drinking water. For the last three years there had been drought. She writes so vividly that it comes alive to our mind's eye, 'Dawn was breaking over a dripping landscape, over an earth asleep in the cool morning breeze after a frenzied mating with the rains. Masses of turbid water swirled in rivulets between the rows of date-palms'(49). Their talk seemed unending. They were sitting on a boulder. She writes, 'The soil here had a strange appearance, with dark black rocks jutting out of the red, undulating earth. There were more boulders to the west, interspersed with belts of forest, and more and more tribal villages' (51). In the morning, 'The sun was about to rise. The wet earth exuded vapour at the first stroke of the sun' (52). Mahasweta's skill of delineation is purely lyrical.

In the course of conversation Bashai turned very angry when he told Kali how the Jotedars and the moneylenders were cheating the agricultural labourers by not paying the minimum wage that was laid down from time to time by the Government since 1953. It was revived in 1959. It was again revived in 1968. But it was a distant dream to the agricultural labourers. The leaders were also remained tight-lipped because they knew that the vote was controlled by the middle and the rich peasantry. With every word Bashai seemed to be wringing the neck of the air. Mahasweta writes, 'The sun had no bite as it peeped dully through the floating slices of clouds. There was a chill in the air. The world around was coming to life. The water in the canal broke into foam, with the kingfishers swooping down to pick up fish revealing their presence in the white froth and the muddy flow that hid them'(55). Bashai lamented for not having deep forest because in that case they would have got hares and iguanas for food having protein. Pointing to the sky Bashai said, 'Look up there. The clouds are turning. Looks like there'll be rain. The clouds are still there wheeling in the sky like the kites' (59). They had tea and puffed rice in the breakfast before going to catch fishes in the canal. Sidha, one of Mushai's sons, had been a sickly child since birth. *Mejhen* had twins. Bashai called them Sidha and Kanu. Kanu died of worms when he was three. And Sidha had wobbly legs. When Bashai was catching fishes in the canal, Kali and some tribals were waiting on the bank. Bashai told Kali that he loved a woman, Draupadi, but she loved Dulna Majhi and married him. In that time someone asked, 'Speaking of me, comrade?'(60) Kali had to turn his head to the source of the voice and got bewildered. Poetry runs through Mahasweta's pen, 'There stood a young Santal woman, aged about twenty-six, very dark, very primitive, strikingly beautiful. She stood like an empress against the sky and the undulating landscape, in a manner that seemed to suggest that she owned it all'(60). Mahasweta is highly gifted with lyricism and as a student of English literature she might have been influenced by the great writers of the English Literature. During lunch they sat under the shade of trees in the yard and had rice, *khesari daal*, a curry of pumpkins and onions, and fish curry. Mushai's wife said, 'We have rice to our heart's fill only when one of Bashai's comrades is here' (62-63).

When Kali was going to the log hut with Betul, Kali's urge to remain alive seemed strongest. Kali remembered, 'During the Bengal Famine of 1943, one of the touring *medical units* of the Communist Party had reported that it was the urge to live that itself served as the food 'that kept Indians alive. It is a food more effective than all the foods rich in vitamins A to Z. Knowing starvation, semi-starvation, rotten food and food that was no food at all as part of their everyday experience, they survived it all only from an urge to live' (64). Remaining confined to the log hut in 1977, Kali was travelling back on the wings of his memory. He returned to May, 1970, when the clash between Bashai and Pratap Goldar, took place. Bashai murdered Pratap because Pratap did not pay the Government approved minimum wage to the labourers and taking the advantage of his social position he utilized and cheated them of their minimum wage. The novelist writes, 'As with the naked and the hungry the world over, the lives of the Santals are determined and regulated by hunger, not by any government. Hunger rules as a tyrant, keeping its subjects always on the run' (71). That May before Bashai's first death Kali met Bashai and then after his death Kali was summoned by the administration to identify Bashai's dead body. It rained torrentially. The following passage describing river Charsha in heavy rain is a brilliant example of poetic passage, 'The river Charsha is like a beggar woman who needs a couple of days' food and a little care to blossom in all her womanly glory. A few days of rain bring a look of prosperity to the Charsha. It was looking glorious at the time' (75). In 1968, minimum wage was fixed for the agricultural labourers at three fifty-four for men, three twenty-seven for women and two two for children respectively. But Pratap did not pay that. Taking the advantage of their poverty Pratap offered them meal with rice, pumpkin curry, and biuli daal. There would be no cut for meal in their wage. Madhab asked Pratap,

'There's just one more thing.'

'Yes, Madhab?'

'Babu, today we begin sowing the fields. Your wife's sent offerings to the temple. Is it fair to give us only pumpkin curry today?'

'Oh!'

‘There’ll be fish only for the OC-babu?’(84)

Kali continued to recollect the second operation, Operation Jagula, in 1972, though it exactly happened six miles away from Jagula, in the village of Kankdasole. But, he was brought to reality by the silent footfalls of the army, ‘The footfalls of an animal on dry leaves. A creature lighter than a man. If it was a man, it had to be one of either the army or the police. When they are busy looking for a *target*, they step with the caution of animals. Once they close in on the *target* they become reckless. They crush under their feet the shrubs, the little *lotuk* birds nestling there and their unhatched eggs. A jackel came up to the door and peered in with great curiosity’ (96-97). The order for minimum wage was effective then, but in record, not in reality. Remeshwar used to pay as he decided- thirty paisa for the adults and twenty for the children. There was no cut in refreshment. In demand of minimum wage Rameshwar was surrounded by many Santals, and face to face with Rameshwar there was Bashai. The SI reached the place of action and what he found is delineated in picturesque detail, ‘There were hundreds of Santals standing grimly around with their primitive weapons- bows and arrows, sickles, hatches, pole axes, short spears, throwing spears, multiheaded fishkilling spears, long spears. The golden paddy, the black men, the blue sky, and the green parakeets descending on the paddy’ (106). In the clash Bashai succumbed to death, but to identify his dead body two hundred fifty-one people were brought by the administration. The approach of Draupadi towards Bashai’s dead body was an excellent piece of poetry, ‘A mysterious woman, the first to alight from the bus, was coming up. She was very dark, as all Santal women are. But she looked mysterious, with her mysteriously built body, as if carved out of rock. She was really mysterious, for she had a face that was not expressionless. A mysterious presence. From the way she alighted and the way she walked she seemed to be the only woman there. The only woman moving towards the only man there..... Kali noticed a wild flower in her hair....she seemed to be there all by herself, all alone, going to meet a man in the heart of some wilderness’(113).

April and May were blazing hot. Early June also disappointed the agricultural labourers. The agricultural labourers of Western Bengal turned into a ‘*wandering zoo*’ (119). Mahasweta writes compassionately, ‘We don’t have a home anywhere,’ or in the harvesting seasons, ‘Are you looking for day labourers? You don’t have to pay us in cash, we’ll work for a meal’- such were the plaintive cries that spread like golden-winged kites and burst against the gates of all those who owned plots of cropland. There were men, women and children moving around in masses with eyes that were paler than the fruits of the cane plant’(119). Surja Sau would not cultivate land from canal water to increase his loan business. There were hundred and hundred Surja Saus in rural Bengal who would anticipate profits from bad crops, drought and famine. As a result the revolutionary like Bashai had to take recourse to violence. Kali was ordered by the administration to go to Bakuli to identify Bashai’s dead body. The following passage is rich in poetic images describing the view of the village from the running car, ‘Bakuli comes into view from beyond the field- a medium-sized village nestling peacefully under deep shadows. A dark blue two-storeyed house, against the approaching evening. The sky was the colour of gold, as in a wedding celebration’ (129). On the basis of the 1974 notification, in the April of 1976, minimum wage for different categories of labourers was fixed, but the landowner Jagattaran Lohari, father of MLA Patitpaban Lohari, was such a leech that he would not give the legitimate wage to the poor labourers. Some of the labourers worked as bonded labourers because their forefathers who long passed away took loans from Jagattaran’s father and for four generations they had been working as bonded labourers and signing with thumb impressions, but the principal and interest remained unpaid. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta Says that, ‘The bonded labour system was introduced by the British. They created a new class, which took away tribal land and converted the tribals into debt-bonded slaves.....You will be surprised to know that, from Kashmir to the Indian Ocean, and from East to West, in every state, there are districts marked as bonded labour districts because there are more than forty thousand bonded labourers in each of them’(Imaginary Maps, iv). In 1976 the Government of India introduced Bonded labour System Abolition Act, but it was without much success.

Later Kali came to know from a young man that three hundred and thirty five new posts of Agricultural Minimum Wage Inspectors were created to look after the implementation of the Government order regarding minimum wage for agricultural labourers. Thirty Assistant Labour Commissioners’ posts were created at the block and sub-divisional levels. But the State Public Service Commission was kept paralysed in such appointments which were purely political in nature. In reality, 245 inspectors and two assistant labour commissioners were recruited. The following instructions from political circle to inspectors in a district could be highly enlightening: ‘*Don’t rush matters for the new rates of wages (Rs 8.10). It’s a new thing and shall take a long time to be accepted by the landowners. But see to it that the agricultural labourers get a little more than what they get at present*’(161-162). The young man told Kali Santra, ‘Why don’t you accept the fact, Kali-babu, that the government never wanted to implement the MW Act’ (162)? In March, 1977, there was new government in power. Kali Santra met the party leader Samanta with the hope of implementation of minimum wage: ‘The MW has got stuck on an *injunction*, an *injunction* that Haridhan Sardar of Piyasole obtained from the High Court during the Congress *regime*. Grounds for *injunction*, a wrong figure in the 1974 MW Revision.’

‘I know.’

‘It’s our government now.’

‘Of course. We are here to stay this time.’

‘Stay on, Samanta, stay. But can’t this government *correct* the wrong *wording* and have the *injunction removed*? Can’t it declare MW to be obligatory, and any violation of it *subject to severe penalty*? Why don’t you raise this demand in the assembly? That’s what I’d like you to do.’

‘Not possible.’

‘Not possible? But why?’

‘Not possible (167).’

In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta asserts, ‘...there is no education for them, no health facilities, no roads, no way of generating income. Nothing is done for them although so much money is allotted for them. They do not want money; they want facilities; they want to live the life of an honourable poor Indian, you might say. But they are denied everything. The tribals of India are denied everything’ (*Imaginary Maps*, iii).

It is quite surprising that how Mahasweta uses lyric when writing about such realistic subject matter. Obviously, her objective was not to show her lyrical power, but to expose the inhuman exploitation of the agricultural and bonded labourers by the combined efforts of the Jotedars, moneylenders, political leaders and establishments. Mahasweta was able to write in such a superb style probably because she could not distinguish the tribals from the most beautiful object of the world- Nature.

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