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## The Dynamics of Exploitation and Authority: Depiction of Inhuman Suffering and the Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*

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### Introduction

After thirty-one years of Independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlines, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constrains is the only source of inspiration in all my writing. All the parties to the Left as well as to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my lifetime any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame. For a writer faces judgement in her lifetime and remains answerable. (MahaswetaDevi, Introduction to *Agnigarbha*).

It is this concern that leads Mahasweta Devi to write for the suffering people for not only she tries to justify violence where system fails to keep peace and do justice but also takes up cudgels against the social inequalities. Seeing the indifference of the contemporary writers towards the subalterns she puts on a Nero-like attitude for she is there to set the benchmark for the other writers who don't have a social conscience and who have failed to perform their duty towards society. For a better understanding of the condition of the poor she even lives with them and this gives her the scope to find out their demands and grievances and all these she puts in her writings and thus she becomes the one in the movement for a better social order and equality in status against the coloured bureaucracy and establishment. So her writings become a direct confrontation with the prevailing codes and norms of the society where she lives in and in doing so she remains apolitical writer too some extent for she refuses quite few times to have any affiliation to the politics of the Left and the Right. She depicts the women subjugation and concurrently the class, caste and gender for she never fails to realise the demands of the situation. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha rightly observe this and in 'Women Writing in India' they comment regarding the writing of MahaswetaDevi:

Women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of caste and class. But in the best of her writing she quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situation she depicts. (235).

### **Where Inhumanity Speaks: *Water* and the Plight of the Marginalised**

Mahasweta Devi's *Water* is one such play which shows man's inhumanity to man and like *Bayen* and *Aajir* this play also focuses on the rural world. Here the dramatist shows how the class-clashes, utter poverty and exploitation create a hell for the innocent folk living in remote villages and thus even an average life for these people is beyond imagination. Here again she writes for the poor who are marginalised and deprived of due status and respectable existence and her men and women "moulded, groomed, trained and matured by a whole community, through and within its experience of suffering" (*Five Plays*xi). But unlike other plays here her attacks become more sharp and specific and *Water* proves to be one of the best plays where her denunciation of the prevailing social rules, norms and regulations and orders are shown in a vivid way. Here apart from the nerve-breaking poverty and oppression, the rising of the subaltern men and women are shown and their sensibility, caring attitude, practicality, rational thinking along with an urge to protest prove that they begin to claim authority for themselves. Her characters become "the truth of continuous evolution in the web of the dialectic of history" (xi), and for this reason after being oppressed for a long time they come to know the ways of oppression and become rebellious and martyrs and sacrifice their life for locating their long lost identity. Samik Bandyopadhyay aptly describes this by pointing out a continuous nonspatial whole between Mahasweta Devi's "Mothers and leaders of men, between the cold, growing awareness of the former shaping into resistance, or stopping at the very edge of defiance, and the evolving militancy of the latter" (x). At the very beginning her protagonists are apolitical and bear the sufferings and tortures but in course of the story they become more aware of their duties and responsibilities towards their community that experiences dehumanised exploitation. Here *Water* is no more exception in this case. Here she presents the archetypal sufferings of the young untouchables who are even alleged of being Naxals if they act insubordinately and in such scenario the protagonist Maghai Dom, a water-diviner rise to the occasion and become the leader of his subaltern community. Vanashree comments regarding the despair of Maghai: "Maghai the landless untouchable farmer, living in a village called Charsa is a variation of Premchand's Hori in *Godan*. *Water* may be read historically as the ongoing sequel to Hori's elegiac tale down the ages; the despair of the rural peasantry is perpetual" (66). But despite his despair and oppression Maghai attempts to break down the traditional boundaries which have been created for depriving his community and thus he becomes human in his inhuman society.

Maghai Dome in this play falls in the category of untouchables and the outcastes of the Charsa can't draw water from the public wells. The situation becomes bitter when the antagonist SantoshPujari creates an artificial famine by hoarding the relief funds provided for the underprivileged sections. He even denies giving what is due to the poor innocent folks. The villagers have no choice but to accept the amount fixed by Santosh for working in his fields. In *Government and Governmentality*, Corbridge comments on this condition: "Santosh and his cohorts, the local officials claim the privileges of sight, including those of insight, foresight and even hindsight" (16).Santosh here looks like the British imperialists for he wants to colonise the untouchables and in doing so he says that if the outcastes don't carry his orders and give free labour then they have to face God's fury for disobeying religious mission which he is operating. Hannah Arendt rightly comments here regarding the mindset of Santosh:

A man feels himself more a man when he is imposing-making others the instrument of his will, which gives him incomparable pleasure. (36).

### **Way of protest: When Myth is satirised**

Like Chandidasi in *Bayen* and Paatan in *Aajir*, Maghai belongs to a class which is deprived, marginalised, oppressed and kept as outcaste and this leads Maghai to build a dam on Chalsa. He says: “The river Charsa flows by my hut, every monsoon she overflows her banks, yet it never struck me with that. This river could give us water in days of drought” (188). Maghai is gifted with an extraordinary skill of water divining for he is accustomed of finding water resources whenever new wells are dug. He takes pride for gaining the secret knowledge from his mythological ancestors and here Bhagirath is mentioned. In a conversation with Dhura he tells: “...the nether Ganga herself, the mother deity of all the hidden waters, spoke: You’re my chosen priest. I’m the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you’ll gather the offerings, pray for water and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig...And ever since that has been our work” (147). This kind of use of myth holds an importance for Mahasweta Devi. She uses the existing myth of Bhagirath to create a new one with her own interpretation and message. To understand people’s consciousness and Maghai’s situation she uses the myth, for she deliberately makes an ironic use of the myth and in her preface to *Shrestha Golpo* she mentions exactly this: “To create the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into contemporary setting and make an ironic use of those” (*Shrestha Galpa* x). She does this to show the plight of the Maghai and other untouchables. They are the victims of caste-discrimination and the local B.D.O and S.D.O help the big guns of the locality in creating fake droughts to make the situation worst for them. In his conversation with three Naxals, Dhura clearly reveals how they struggle to get water and how they lose:

DHURA. Strange, you’re leaving, and it hurts. But Santosh Pujari? That’s a real devil...

THREE. A real evil one, eh?

DHURA. Right. There’s nothing he’ll stop at. He goes to the town, collects money for relief, and won’t spend a paisa for the stricken villages itself. Look at his house, rising from height to height. There are twenty villages bound to him in debt forever. He’ll leave nobody in peace.

ONE. Water’s your greatest problem, isn’t that so?

DHURA. We don’t know what water is...My father Maghai Dome knows all about water. Every year he spots the place, and Santosh digs, and there’s new well.

ONE. Then what’s the problem?

DHURA. They wouldn’t allow us to teach it. Even at the government wells, we aren’t allowed to draw water. (125-126)

### **Song of the Unsung: The Subalterns Fight back**

Santosh Pujari, an orthodox Brahmin makes the life of the rustics miserable by hoarding the relief given by the government and thus he creates artificial famine. He compels the untouchables to obey him and forbids them to draw water from wells. He even does not allow Maghai to take water. He says: “We worship our gods in our houses and you eat pigs and fowl...Isn’t the water polluted if you touch it?” (138). This type of attitude does not allow Maghai to provide a drop of water to his family. Health condition of the people is not so good and Maghai is one such example. He is losing his eyesight as he

says: “I’m not weaving any patched quilt. It’s only baskets I’m weaving from bamboo stalks. But even that I can’t see” (142). But he can’t go to the hospital for checking his eyes because he has no money for commuting back and forth. Dhura tells him to take money from Santosh but Maghai knows that Pujari will not give any money. At this moment Dhura’s reply seems to be an initial step of protest for he questions the authority. He says angrily: “He can’t have a well dug without your help. So you go about helping him dug all those walls. Then why shouldn’t he pay you to have your eyes treated?” (142). This type of protest can be seen in Maghai also. He asks Santosh regarding the relief funds and he also wants to dig a well for those who are labelled as untouchables. In a conversation with Santosh he says:

MAGHAI. You’ve already collected the government relief for us. Why haven’t we got the money and materials yet?

SANTOSH. You will, you will, Maghai.

MAGHAI. But when? Don’t you know Maatang’s sister and her child have died of starvation? (136).

The villagers are often treated as other and Naxals. They are the subalterns in the hands of European colonisers like Santosh who creates rules, regulations and custom according to his benefit. Invoking customs become a way for Santosh to continue his exploitation and oppression of the underprivileged. The custom and the relationship between the powerful master and powerless slaves hold importance in this context and Deepesh Chakrabarty comments: “To speak of custom means to identify that range of activity, called privileges by the masters, assumed as rights by the slaves who flowed from the master’s knowledge that the violation of norms would carry an unacceptable level of risk” (180). But in such scenario she shows some kind of authority in Dhura, Maghai’s son who tries his best to make people realise that Santosh is the main cause of their suffering and exploitation although Maghai continuously works for Santosh. Like Dhura Mahasweta Devi creates Jiten Maiti, an idealistic teacher who not only wants to liberate the subalterns but also advises Maghai to build a dam on the river. Seeing danger in the social activities of Jiten, Santosh at first instigates government officers to take step against him and later even tries to control his voice by offering bribe. Santosh tries to prove that the villagers and Jiten’s followers are Naxals and this he does only to give them punishment and thus the label of Naxals becomes a medium to suppress the rising voices at the time.

Maghai wants to help his community and he tries his best for the betterment of them, for he knows the pains of a caged bird. He does not want them to live anymore in hunger for he knows “the one thing that’s most dreadfully real is the hunger gnawing at one’s stomach. There’s nothing more real than hunger” (109). Maghai and his family have never experienced a wholesome meal and they had never a full stomach and Dhura says exactly this: “We’ve never had a full stomach, neither you nor me nor mother...All the paddy, all the lentils that Charsa grows, and Santosh’s barns bursting with paddy, and piles of molasses and mustard seeds, and what not?” (144). So Dhura is seen as someone who is outspoken, rebellious and frank. He wants to make other people aware of their pitiful condition. He is deeply influenced by the Naxalites and does not hesitate to raise his voice seeing the inhuman tortures, inequalities and humiliations. When Maghai says that the fate of his people is only like that and unfortunately his people have no other way to do justice with themselves Dhura says:

I won't accept fate. What a shame, we burn hearts to cinders to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of the earth, and then they refuse us neither a drop of water, nor a drop for the Domes and Chandals. I spit upon fate, if that's our fate. (146).

### **From Margin to the Centre: The rise of Phulmani**

Not only Dhura but his mother Phulmani is also outspoken and aggressive. She is not like the typical Indian mothers who are full of emotions. In a heated conversation with Dhura she advises her son to be polite while talking with his father. She tells Dhura: "A son doesn't talk to his father in that tone, shame on you (spits on the ground). It's your father's standing that gives you your standing, and brings us honour. Keep that in mind" (143). She is dauntless and this is proved when she blames Santosh pointing him as the only source of their misery. She takes the lead and represents the women of her community. She demands a well for them for she says:

We die without water, our little ones go thirsty, our women dig at the sands of the river for a cupful of water. Who'd play such a cruel game with the water that we need to quench our thirst. (138).

Through Phulmani Mahasweta Devi wants to break the traditional notion of women. Here also her women show indomitable spirit and want to take hold of the situation by breaking her boundaries and silence. Her resentments are the results of poverty, misery, persecution and anguish of a wife, a mother and a woman in general. Out of all these she bursts out before Santosh and warns him not to exploit the people of her community. Bravely she confronts Santosh and says: "I've seen you as a kid. You can't scare me. (She points at Maghai) This husband of mine is a water-diviner; he worships the water, draws out the hidden water. But I've never sung to his tune. Men trade in paddy, you trade in relief... (Raises her palms before Santosh) These two hands of mine are full of sores. Santosh, all from scratching about the sands of the Charsa for water...This year we demand a well for our use" (137-138). From the above lines two things are cleared. Firstly, she doesn't like Santosh for his greedy nature and ways of exploitation. Secondly, she doesn't approve her husband's profession. She also sympathizes with Maghai but at the same time she doesn't stop herself from pointing out his failures, irrational attitude and over simplicity. She seems to be the other-self of the play's protagonist and she tries her best to liberate herself from conventional rules laid down by feudal system. Along with the protagonist she shares all the pain, sufferings, frustrations, depression and joys and thus in spite of not being the central figure of the play, she presents at the very centre. She complains against Maghai for his ultimate understanding of his role and the need for a revolt to gain lost freedom and happiness. She tries to raise her voice through Phulmani who is twice oppressed but never surrenders before the ruling class. In her conversation with the teacher Jiten, she emphasises the importance of working together to defy the establishment. She tells Jiten that Dhura should earn that amount of money which he can use to feed his wife twice a day, for survival comes at first to continue the fight for liberation. She tells Jiten when Jiten supports Dhura's rebellious notions:

No, teacher. You won't understand. It's so difficult between you and us...Our bodies are made for hardwork. We need daughters-in-law, we need grandchildren, we need a house full of people. And it's only then that there are all those working hands. And water is easier to get. Scratching at the sands for water-simply can't any longer. Look at this pitcher of mine, it's leaking. (157).

### **Towards an postmodern Ecocentric approach: Maghai's love for river Charsa**

Every character here seems to be tied with some rules and regulations and Maghai is no more exception. Maghai is a man of words and he does only what he wants to do and no one can compel him to do a work he dislikes. But this very man does the work of water diving because his ancestors handed down this job to Maghai. He says: “How can I refuse to come for a job that’s been handed down to me by my ancestors, a job that I owe to my caste...I’ll be doomed to hell if I betray that trust. I do my job and go without water” (153-171). Through Maghai she shows not only determination but also her concerns for the Mother Earth and Nature. Maghai shows his love for nature and river Charsa and he somehow tries to assert his voice on behalf of nature. In this world of technological advancement and development man is destroying nature and Maghai’s comment on river Charsa proves to be an attempt to protect nature. Nature is there to be loved, protected, and appreciated for her beauty. Phulmani says that Charsa is her co-wife and no wife loves a co-wife and specially that one who captures the heart of her husband completely. Such is the love between Charsa and Maghai. These words of Maghai clearly describe their relation:

Ah, ah,ah, it’s the fortnight of the new moon in July, with the days as dark as the nights. How gloriously beautiful you appear, my Charsa! Yes, my girl, go dancing all the way, dance, dance, ah, my darling life blood!...At the sight of water I get flushed, with my blood beating the madal...Dhura’s mother is right. You’re a whore, a fallen woman. In the summer months when I scrape at your breasts, how you flirt with me! You sing to me.” (165-167).

#### **Voice of the Voiceless: Jiten, Dhura, Maghai and the policies of Resistance**

Although he is in love with Charsa and her people but he fears to go against those who are exploiting Charsa and her people. Maghai knows everything about Santosh and wants to revolt against him but he is afraid of the exploitation, oppression and suffering make him fearful, submissive. Mahasweta Devi shows the pitiful condition of the subalterns and their psychology. How tough it is for them to break their own boundaries and mindset for they have circled themselves with pain, torture and misery. They are accustomed to live in subordinate position and even their dreams are not liberated. In his conversation with Jiten, he expresses his views about Santosh: “You won’t understand. He’s the landowner of landowners, the money-lender of money-lenders. The SDO and the police chief go by his brief, they send relief through him. Oh god, there are times I have a vision of a dawn, with Santosh rising in the east, turning the sky a blazing red and pouring down sheets of fire” (*FP*169). Here the effect of the subjugation and exploitation on the psyche of Maghai and his rural folk can be seen clearly. In such condition she brings Jiten on the stage. Jiten is a follower of Gandhi and he is moved by seeing the condition of the untouchables. He moves forward to make things better for them. He not only lives with the domes but also teaches their children and actively fights for their rights. He asks the SDO about the relief funds and also tells him to take immediate step, for the SDO also shows his indifference to the poor. Jiten even complains against Santosh before the SDO: “There’s more to it, there’s caste discrimination. Santosh doesn’t let the Domes have water” (173). Here he raises questions over the judgement of Indian administrative system. Here the pseudo pragmatism and quasi morality of the SDO illustrate the point more forcefully. The officers know everything but do nothing. Regarding the work ethics of the SDO, Jiten says: “With officers like you... this is no Andhra, no Bihar, no direct atrocities on harijans...and Santosh carries on with his mischief. It’s your inaction that supports Santosh. He’s a dirty man. He was beaten up twice at the Charsa station, once for selling illicit liquor, the other time for molesting a coolie girl. Twice arrested twice released” (176-177). He seems to be the alter-ego of his creator and this is proved when he furiously replies the officer who calls Maghai ‘an illiterate fool’ and his act ‘Mumbu-

jumbo'. Jiten believes that tribals are not fools and superstitious. They are not inferior, for they have their own traditions and culture. They possess more knowledge than many people of so called cultured civilized and polished society. Jiten's words seem to the authority, for he is there to raise the standard of the subalterns who have everything but reduce to nothing. He says:

Our country's exceptional, don't you realize that? Knowledge and culture here have nothing to do with literacy as such. Someone like Maghai can have both knowledge and culture. They have a mind like a continent that no one has cared to explore. (169).

From the very beginning, she has shown how the caste discrimination has made all the differences and even the SDO tell this to Jiten: "Unofficially speaking, I'll admit, it's there. It's there in the blood of the people...how can you get rid of it?" (173). But in this same play she shows how the sinners are overwhelmed by regret. And here Santosh proves to be one such example. The goodness of the subalterns are shown to such an extent that the sinners feel hesitated and confused while doing harm to them and this goodness proves to a silent protect against those sinners. Santosh confesses exactly this: "What a sinner I am, what great sinner, now I have to harm this learned man. It hurts me here. I grew up rocking in a cradle that Maghai made. He used to make wonderful bird-snares for me. Oh! What a shame!...What remorse! What misery! Why did Jiten have to come here? Why?" (191). He even orders his servant to give Maghai two Palmyra stalks free as Maghai wants to buy those. In this same context she shows the nature of men and their different outlook. While Maghai is ready to do good for his people, Dhura knows only to revolt and kill. So the deadly desire of Dhura is balanced with serene and peaceful nature of Maghai and these contrasts are needed for the society. One will break the established rules, regulations, rituals and cultures to bring new ones and the other will build the society upon those new ones. The revolt motif is seen in Jiten also towards the end of the play for he wants to establish his authority to redeem the untouchables of Charsa from the eternal curse of water. He tells Maghai: "The region abounds with boulders. If we could gather the boulders and dam the river up here, within its high banks...The monsoon brings rains, and blows away. But there'll be water stored within the dam after the monsoon's passed. A few boulders might be washed away, but not all of them...The dam will hold water" (181-182). This very idea of building a dam across Charsa raises the spirit of Maghai and his people engage themselves to construct the dam. This reminds the readers about the monkeys who built the Lanka Bridge under the divine guidance of Lord Ram in Ramayana. The rising of the subalterns are shown completely by the dramatist and this is enhanced with the singing of chorus': Hey Lanka, hey Lanka/We're on the way to Lanka,/a boulder on our backs,/a boulder on the ground,/we're building the bridge to Lanka./Hey Lanka!Hey Lanka" (183). But Santosh tries his best to punish Maghai, Jiten and the untouchables for they begin to revolt against the supremacy of the feudal system. He incites the SDO who in turn misleads the police office and as a result shoot at sight order is released against the protestors. Santosh wants to break the dam because "that the dam will have to be broken and all those men arrested" (192).Maghai, Jiten and the rest try to save it at any cost and they even offer puja to Mother Manasa to save them and the dam. But this proves futile when Santosh brings police force to kill them. Jiten is wounded along with Maghai who is found heavily wounded with blood coming out from his chest. She, in a very realistic way, portrays the struggle and fight of the subalterns:

The police enter with men, beating them mercilessly with the butts of their rifles. Maghai is not with them. Jiten, Dhura and some of the others try to hit back...Jiten snatches a policeman's rifle

from his hand and throws it away. A policeman brings down a crushing blow with the butt of his rifle on Jiten's head. Jiten falls to the ground with a wail. (197).

## Conclusion

Water is one such play of Mahasweta Devi where she challenges the very authority of the feudal system in a vivid way. Her Maghai emerges as one such character who not only fights against the establishment but also for his own people and Mother Nature. In a moment of crisis when he sees the police breaking the dam he utters and gives a clarion call to his untouchable people: "No-o-o-o! Forward, everyone! We hold the Great Mother's pole in our hands; we'll crush the bastards with this pole" (196). She has shown how her protagonist in the play turns into a rebel to stand against the establishment. Jiten, Maghai and Dhura try their best to break the boundaries which are created by the upper class members like Santosh and the SDO to explore the lower class in order to fulfil their own interests. At the end of the play all these rebels march ahead with their will and self belief and finally embrace death, rather martyrdom, to ascertain their freedom, authority and identity and thus in a state of frenzy, Maghai wishes to be carried away with water for which he is fighting. He wants a different death and thus he tells Phulmani:

It's the Bhagirath of the nether Ganga here, wife. I can't let them carry me as a corpse into their bloody morgue. My last journey will be with water. (198).

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