

Discourse of Memory, Orality, and Subalternity in Mahasweta Devi's

The Book of the Hunter

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight Mahasweta Devi's diligent forays into the life of tribals and their demand for tribal sovereignty. The aspects which have been analyzed in the novel - *The Book of the Hunter* - firstly highlight the contentious relationship between the elite and subaltern and secondly, the study explores the ramifications of this discordant relationship and its impact on the representation or misrepresentation of the subaltern in the mainstream. The objective in the study has been to expose how the history of the tribals and their marginalization is unknown to the people. It highlights Mahasweta Devi's attempt to write a subaltern history which rectifies the slanderous obstructions and fabrications of elitist history. It has been presented how in *The Book of the Hunter*, she has recorded the tribal folklores and myths to rewrite the official records in an authentic light.

Keywords: Memory, Tribal, Subaltern, Marginalization, Folklores, History, Orality

Mahasweta Devi is the most influential authors of the present times. She has picked up a niche for herself in the realm of sociably relevant Indian literature. A humanistic vision exalted in her novels has left an inerasable mark on the current literary scenario. A unique fusion of sensitivity and courage, she has more than hundred creative endeavours to her credit containing short-stories, novels, dramas, children books and multifarious articles for journals, newspapers, and magazines. The writings of Mahasweta Devi are inherently significant to the modern times. Her activism and its decisive relevance to certain boiling issues of the third world society foreground her honest consideration for social issues. The base of her writings is her engrossment with the marginalized and the subalterns or the downtrodden. These

people are the core of the writings of Mahasweta Devi which is an integral part of her activism at grassroots level. Her everlasting concern for the weak and the suppressed is mirrored in every aspect of her life and work. In placing memory as an aspect of oral tradition or Orality, it has been asserted that memory is an essential element of oral cultures. In *The Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres*, Weissenrieder and Coote state

How important was memory? ...the first century (for instance) was a memory culture more than it was a manuscript culture. Collective memory was crucial in the predominantly oral cultures of the first century. (It has been observed) how memory predominated over writing and was crucial to every aspect of Orality. (173)

As aforementioned, memory finds an essential connection to Orality which can be seen in the cultures which depend up on Orality. Further, it can be authenticated that regarding the oral tradition, memory plays a crucial role. Oral tradition or Orality continues to prevail due to the power of memory lest they are forgotten and obliterated totally or misremembered. In accentuating this critical aspect of memory in regard to Orality, E. Eve has stated in *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition*:

Oral tradition is closely related to memory. In order to survive as oral tradition it must be memorable, and particular individuals must remember it. It also forms one part of the social or collective memory of the group to which the tradents (people who hand on the tradition) belong... (3)

If history is fabricated to emphasise then Subaltern Memory as an instrument of Orality overthrows these perfunctory specifics, in order to dispense a subaltern history. The documents, histories, records and other sources of official transformations and creation of history can be meddled with, but by implementing the confirmatory devise of Subaltern Memory, a legitimate account of history can be determined.

Memory does not undermine the order in the society but unmasks the fabricated lies that are inflicted so the authority can continue to carry out its dominance in the absence of balances and checks. Subaltern Memory holds the authority by: firstly revealing the truth of the past, hence assuring the elite is accused and hindered to repeat its mistakes; secondly in tracing individual memories which are a source of identity for the subaltern; and thirdly revisiting the collective memory propagated by the elite to get the truth and establish it in regard to the individual memories.

In writing *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi has claimed to have written novel which serve as a reflection of tribal life, its exploitation, and the consequences of the same in Indian history. The objective of this paper is to accentuate the importance of Orality and revive it as a basic tool of writing subaltern history. She has strived to confront the idealising of the tribal, who has enforced to numerous strands of fragmented, inorganic and to put it obtrusively disreputable portrayals of the tribal in the history of India. Through this novel she has not only rewritten tribal history from the point of view of the tribal but also projected her novels as a testimony of colonial and postcolonial subterfuge of criminalising the indigenous.

It can be viewed that in outlining a historical truth while telling a fictional narrative, Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* is a perfect example. In investigating the past and correlating it with the present, Devi has, in *The Book of the Hunter*, recounted a history of difference between the subaltern and the elite. This difference that is used as a justification for discrimination and injustice has been analysed in the novel. The novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, traces the origins of this injustice and discrimination, in the castiest mentality of the elite; it traces it as reflected in the myths of the tribals; and it also explores it in the feudal system which has inflicted, strengthened, and used it as a tool. The novel stands as a microcosm of India's present and past with regard to the accord between the elites and the tribals. As Mahasweta Devi has used the oral sources, by assimilating what the Lodhars have to recount about their own past, the novel serves as a proof to uncover discrimination, and

confront it, while assuring the history of the tribal is not any further slandered because of elitist practices of injustice, prejudice, intolerance and power exploitation. She has portrayed the lives of Brahman Mukundaram and his wife as symbolic of elite, and the young Shabars - Kalya and Phuli as symbolic of a subaltern to underline the racial orders that divide the society into low and high and flood the society with complications of distressing undertones. The aim being that the Shabars may have been criminalized by the colonial administration but the society is also in contempt of the aboriginals, so much so that even now regarding this discrimination has not found any solution.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi has explored this racial intolerance which has fostered a gap between the subaltern and the elite. She accentuates this fanatical discrimination through the point of view of Mukunda, the protagonist of the novel. Mukunda has been depicted as elite who tries to bridge the gap between the elite and the subaltern. When he comes to know about exploitation encountered by the tribals, he determines to record their history. In Mukunda's probing for a reliable history, one can ascertain Mahasweta Devi's own revisiting into the chapters of tribal history. Mukunda belongs to the elite class in the hierarchical set-up established in the rural society. Mahasweta Devi has unravelled the voice in his conscience that forces him to write a piece of historical importance. What that piece is to be, reveals itself when Mukunda comes in regard with the discriminated section of the society especially the hunting tribes.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mukunda is portrayed as ideal elite who is not repelled by the low-castes and meets a friend in Ganesh, who belongs to Bagdi caste which is regarded as the lowest in the social stature of Indian society. In perceiving the exploitation endured by the likes of Ganesh, and how he himself is driven to abandon his own hometown because of barbaric exploitation of the feudal masters, Mukunda implants a consciousness - that is realizing the pains and agonies endured by the low-castes around him. In this strained exodus, Mukunda sees the unkind reality of his society, "he didn't know anything about the cycles of

rule, but he knew one thing that difficult and evil times have driven him from Daminya (his native town) to Ararha ...ruler's oppression ...land full of sinners ...wreck and ruin came into the people's lives (13). It is also when he comes to Ararha, his family interplays with the hunting tribes. During one of these meetings, Mukunda is marshalled to record the imperilled life of the tribals.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi portrays another aspect of his personality to explore how intensely the weeds of injustice and discrimination have ensconced themselves that even sensitized elite can fall to its ambush. She remarks how, in spite of Mukunda's efforts to know and empathise with the hunting tribes, he still is indignant of the ways of the Shabars whom he regards illiterate when compared to his erudition. He is surprised to learn that the Shabars do not, "treat the king as their king, and they don't bow to greet a Brahman... their ways and rules are different" (56). In recounting how Mukunda turns into the autocracy he wants to oppose, Mahasweta Devi accentuates one incident wherein Mukunda cannot dissuade his chauvinism and prejudice to intervene with his rationality. For example, when he learns of Tejota, a tribal well-versed in medicinal savvy without any proper learning, Mukunda becomes enthralled in his hypocritical rejection of it.

In spite of his humanitarian countenance and tolerance of character, Mukunda unmask himself pretending as biased at viewing an evidently young tribal can make brilliant strides like an erudite. And the fact that he is not aware of this pretentious hatred, tells of the elite subaltern clash that can be highlighted only by deliberate sensitization of the same issue. Mukunda continues to, in spite of the temptations to manifest discrimination, makes a revolutionary effort to "go and find out about them" without letting any historical hatred, cultural racism or social convention and bias impeding his effort. In perceiving these two proportions, Mahasweta Devi seeks to unmask the mask off of how injustice and discrimination is intensely deep-rooted in the society to revolt against it would require a conscious effort - to realize it can pollute even the elites like Mukunda.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, one finds how the protagonist is forced to surmise the nihilistic structures of feudalism, and caste-system that have led the tribals to desert their lands. It is because of these personal challenges with docterial power that he gets the will and spirit to record. The purpose behind his writing is to make sense of the society which is running toward a precipice, and to also record the tribals who as he meets are badly portrayed in the society. Thus, one can perceive the tell-tale strains of Mahasweta Devi in the character, both are concerned to revive subaltern voices because they are involved in changing contemporary power coalitions and they write. It must also be observed that such an endeavour of re-writing history from the subaltern perspective does not result in the whole writing of history as futile or deceitful. Instead, “the connections between us and the subalterns we seek to recover exist also in the fact that past histories continue to inform the world we live in” (203). To this note of personal concerns intervening with the public agenda of fixing the subaltern, Mahasweta Devi has depicted how Mukunda wants to record the Shabars with an honest and unbiased eye.

During the course of the novel, Mukunda starts to discern the sensitive nature of writing the history of the tribals. He discerns how it must not contaminate their life by fake concoctions and scandals, and should not violate their lives by exploiting or criminalizing them. It is appropriate to perceive how Ranajit Guha has stressed this important ethics of writing a history, when he says in *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*,

the subaltern is the maker of his own history and the architect of his destiny...
the subaltern groups are to write that history and oppose elitism through the detailed intensity of their scrutiny of the past record no matter how great the difficulties posed by the recovery of information about the past. (192)

In perceiving these tenets of subaltern history, one can mark three delineations; first, subaltern must be the maker of his history which must be regarded as conspicuous; second, historians should assure to write their history as Mahasweta Devi has done by studying

written as well as oral specifics to make the platform for the subaltern to speak; third this revival of the past should be ardently pursued as any half-hearted and doubtful modes of history writings also serves to further the dishonest ploy of discrimination and injustice. In drawing attention to the progressive change that is discernible in the character of Mukunda, Mahasweta Devi assures that there is always hope of reconciliation. As portrayed in the novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, Mukunda starts to reconcile with Tejota and starts to admire the diversity in the cultures of his society. In not interfering with their private histories, Mukunda starts to locate the subaltern history, “No, no, I don’t; want to ask about family matters ... I want to know about Megha Raja! And about Banachandi, the forest goddess ...” (67). Tejota tries to bridge the gap between the high-castes and her tribal communities. She accentuates the need of interdependence between the elite and the subaltern. It is in this aspect, the aim of Mahasweta Devi looms forth that the class difference should cede to mutual reconciliation. In the stream of her novel, dynamic efforts are made by Mukunda and Tejota in the wake of their own people’s animosity to this belief. It is not only that disharmony is emerging from the elites but that the subalterns also deny reconciling with the elite and are decided to extend the primitive hatred into the present. Thus, both elites and subalterns are in chronic aversion to each other, and it is up to Tejota and Mukunda to break the shackles of prejudices and settle them into an accord. For instance, Kayla who is the son of Tejota is decisively disdainful of the belief to trust a Brahman. He refutes with his mother, his wife when they even specify the Brahmans, “I am a Shabar. I do not tread on the shadow of a Brahman” (111).

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mukunda is also befuddled at these decrees, so much so his concern over the hunting tribes fluctuates between a searing judgment and a complex wince. He is at a loss to acknowledge the diversity of other cultures, and doubts them for being other. In one of the crucial conversations between Mukunda and Kalya Shabar, Mahasweta Devi has underlined the sunken origins of hatred that negated the chance of any

congenial relationship between the elites and the subaltern tribes. Kalya feels intimidated by Mukunda's concern about his tribe due to a historical acrimony that has deteriorated over the years. He proclaims over his legacy with a vivacity to reinforce his culture as superior and not inferior as is the prevailing perceptions of the elites, "The goddess Abhayachandi has given you puja for work, books, a granary, and a cowshed, while she gave us the jungle. We're Shabars, you hear, children of the jungle... Now, Thakur! Go and read your manuscripts! " (52-53).

At the end of the novel, Mukunda realizes that his morale to write specifically realizing the unseemly death of Kalya and his wife Phulli. This death overwhelms him to regard it as the death of whole tribe - Who will know them? Who will once they are extinguished in the name of ethnic purge? How to prevent this from happening? It is this incident which clutches his spirits to record and thereby bring to light the hardships of his times, so the future can try to rectify it. Thus, Mukunda is acquired with an incensed fervour to establish a subaltern history, so that, “Everyone will know about Kalketu and Phullora, and you all will live forever!” (153).

In *The Book of the Hunter*, one can find how in tracing this subaltern history of the tribals, Mahasweta Devi has fiercely exposed the subterfuge of the elite in quelling an entire community from existence. It is a socio-political and an ideological subterfuge to annex history and replace it with an egocentric and bourgeoisie-centric transcription and impromptu of history. In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Spivak considers this, “a process of epistemic violence” and that “history is not simply a disinterested production of facts... (but) an interested construction ...with no reality outside its representation” (200). It has been the catalyst of Subaltern Studies to project the binarism between the subaltern and the elite. In order to deconstruct this interplay, history has been surveyed as being a monopoly of the official narratives. It is because of this strict arrangement, that the histories of the ethnic communities are downgraded to the margins, and if present in the mainstream, it is not an essence of truth but a lie.

It can be contended whether Mahasweta Devi’s writings can serve to recount history. In perceiving the arguments analysed above, the novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, assuredly attacks the biased views that fiction is inferior to history and cannot assert truth or serve to tell the world of the truth; further the novel also criticises the embedded belief that fiction is in direct contradiction to history, and is an contending force; and that it is a harbinger of

fabrications. These blinkered perspectives on the power of fiction are substantially reviled by Mahasweta Devi's writings which admit to a rethinking of these strict perspectives and assuring fiction is regarded as an ally to history and instead a maker of history, and also vice-versa. Accordingly, one can firmly state that it is due to her dependence and exploration of both oral and written sources that her historical novel portrays the subaltern in an authentic background. Thus, this paper aims at: criticising the trivialization of Orality; accentuating her portrayal of the tribals from the view of subaltern history; analysing the contention between history and literature; examining the relationship between the subaltern and the elite from past to present and ultimately aiming to sensitize the mainstream people about the history of the tribal.

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