

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2016 - Vol. 5, Issue- 4

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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A Comparative Study on the Themes of Exploitation and Gender Issues in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Ngugi Wa Thiong`O's *Weep Not Child*

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to undertake a comparative analysis of the writings of an Indian writer-activist Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926) and the East African revolutionary writer-activist Ngugi wa Thiong`o (b. 1938) keeping in mind their different social background, both in their individual lives as well as in their socio-political and cultural conditions of their respective countries of birth. Both these countries have been subjected to long periods of colonial subjugation and that has altered the identity according to its own requirements. Racial discrimination and caste system are so deep rooted in both these colonized nations where new challengers are waiting to be discovered. Furthermore, the paper presents that Devi's *Draupadi* and Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) are the epitome of class conflict, exploitation and gender discrimination. Thus, I have critically examined the extremities faced by the protagonists in these writers in a state of constant flux.

Keywords: exploitation, hopelessness, patriarchal, gender issue, women subjugation, disintegration

INTRODUCTION

Born in the pre-independent India, Mahasweta Devi has witnessed the important phase such as World War II, Quit India Movement of 1942 and the Bengal famine of 1943. Her involvement with social and political happenings started very early. She admitted, "In the seventies, in the Naxalite Movement, I saw exemplary integrity, selflessness, and the guts to die for a cause. I thought I saw history in the making and decided that as a writer it would be my mission to document it." (*Mother of 1084*, 1997, xii) She can be placed alongside Gopinath Mohanty in her realistic portrayal of tribal life. A very few writers like Mahatma Phule, Yashwant Manohar, Laxman Mane and Kishore Khale have conveyed the plight of the most downtrodden and marginalised section of the Indian society. She is the most prominent writer-activist who voiced for the voiceless sector of the society. She focused mainly on the predicament of the dispossessed tribes as well as other underprivileged people of East India. Her main objective in writing is to uplift the untouchable people to the equal status of the so called higher classes.

Minoli Salgado commented about Mahasweta Devi and her works in her article, *Tribal Stories, Scribal World: Mahasweta Devi and the Unreliable Translators*:

Mahasweta Devi is probably the most widely translated Indian writer of an indigenous language today. Now recognised as the foremost living writer in Bengali, she has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing.

Chronologically, Mahasweta Devi is older than Ngugi by about twelve years. Also, their social and cultural backgrounds could not be more removed from each other. Both India and Kenya had been colonies of British till the 19th century and thus shared the common 'question of their identity'. British ruled Kenya between 1895 and 1963. Kenya became an Independent country on 12th December, 1963. Even after their independence the condition of native Kenyans did not improve. Their status in the society is similar to the tribes portrayed in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi.

As rightly pointed by Mathew Arnold in his inaugural lecture delivered on "*On the Modern Element in Literature*" in the University of Oxford.

Everywhere there is a connection. Everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures. (14th November, 1857)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an eminent Kenyan writer. Along with Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, he is one of the increasing numbers of African writers of international reputation. He writes novels, short stories, plays and essays. Raised in British ruled Kenya, he witnessed the conflicts of European and traditional African cultures. As a child he attends a mission school and then sent to a Gikuyu school during Mau Mau rebellion. Some of his family members get imprisoned in the fight against colonialists. This is why he becomes a revolutionary writer who makes use of language and literature a weapon to confront postcolonial imperialism in Africa and his homeland. His works of fiction have attracted much attention and have been a subject of debate in African literary domain. In his *Weep Not, Child* he presents the issues relating to women, oppression and exploitation done to the youths who eventually turn out to be rebels. Unlike, Ngugi wa Thiong'o whose medium of writing is English, Mahasweta Devi writes in Bengali, but her works have been translated into various regional languages of India. He was formerly writing his works in English and now in his Kenyan language, Gikuyu. Born in Kenya in 1938, Ngugi wa Thiong'o witnessed the political turmoil in East Africa, not as an outsider. He, like Mahasweta Devi believed in the doctrine that literature is meant to uplift the voiceless section of the society. *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first novel to be published by a writer of African origin. It was set against the backdrop of Mau Mau rebellion. He had a mission of bringing the exploitation and racial disintegration of the natives of Kenya to the limelight. The novel is an outcry of the aborigines of Kenya who were muted for centuries.

EXPLOITATION AT ITS PEAK:A POST-COLONIAL SCENARIO

The title of Ngugi's debut novel, *Weep Not, Child* is taken from the motivational poem of Walt Whitman's *On the Beach at Night*,

Weep Not, Child

Weep not, my darling

With these kisses let me remove your tears

The ravening cloud shall not be long victorious,

They shall not possess the sky...

.....

The vast immortal sun and the long enduring pensive moons shall again shine.
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/174743>)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's first published novel is *Weep Not, Child*. It traces the adolescence of a boy called Njoroge as his life begins to fall apart when Kenya is about to gain its independence. Njoroge's life begins to change when he got the chance to go to school. His main obsession is to help his family and his community improve. However, his life soon undergoes hardships when his brothers join the revolutionary Mau Mau, thus getting involved in the terrifying politics of the region. Njoroge is in love with Mwhaki, his childhood friend and the daughter of a rich African farmer, Jacobo, who owns the land on which Ngotho, Njoroge's father, and his family live. Njoroge's father and Mwhaki's are in clash throughout the novel, as Jacobo has earned land and received special privileges by collaborating with the white colonists. One of Ngotho's sons kills Jacobo, and this affects Njoroge as he knows it may lead Mwhaki to terminate their friendship forever. However, when Njoroge's family begins to be threatened by the struggle of the Mau Mau revolutionaries against the British regime, his desire to learn increases, as he realizes that formal schooling can help him restore ancestral lands and achieve Kenya's independence. His life quickly collapses, though, when he is forced to terminate his school life due to his father's death and his brothers' entanglement in the political activities. Working temporarily and eventually fired by an abusive shopkeeper, Njoroge's hope to continue his dreams of studying abroad and returning to help his family and his nation is shattered. His last hope is to run away to Uganda with Mwhaki. However, Mwhaki declares that she cannot leave her mother to go with him. Feeling that he has been forsaken by everything he once cares for, Njoroge attempts suicide but is fortunately rescued by his two mothers Nyokabi and Njeri. *Weep Not, Child* teems with passages in which female characters shed tears owing to their experience of unfavourable circumstances. For example, Njeri's "Tears were on her face" (p. 85) when she speaks bitterly of the white man's oppression of her black folk. She is estranged by the white men's oppressive attitude towards any man of her tribe who "rises and opposes that law which made right the taking away of [their]land" (p. 85). Mwhaki also is capable of being in tears. The narrator says that "he (Njoroge) saw tears in her eyes" (p. 150) when she feels remorse for suspecting Njoroge's complicity in her father's murder. Commenting on Mwhaki's frequent crying, Nicholls (2010) maintains that "the character who cries most abundantly in the novel is Njoroge's female childhood, Mwhaki, who

is usually rendered in childlike imagery, even as an adolescent” (p. 12). Female characters in *Weep Not, Child* also burst into tears as an expression of grief over the death of someone dear to them. Reacting to the death of her father, Mwhaki “burst into tears. Njoroge was horrified to see the tears of a big girl. He would not have believed this of Mwhaki. And Mwhaki took her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.” (p. 107) Nyokabi and Njeri are also capable of shedding tears over the eminent death of their husband, Ngotho. As the narrator says, “Nyokabi and Njeri sat in a corner. Njoroge could see tears flowing down their cheeks. As a child he had been told that if women wept when a man was ill it showed that the patient had no hope.” (p. 138)

Despite the masculine attempts to exclude Njeri from political dialogue, she displays unprecedented wilfulness and great capacity for articulating her political views. This figures clearly in the following passage in which she, unlike most women in her tribe who are denied their free will, shrewdly voices her view on the injustice of Jomo Kenyatta’s arrest and subsequent trial: Nyokabi said, “I knew he [Kenyatta] would lose. I always said that all white men are the same. His lawyers must have been bribed.” “It is more than that,” said Njeri. “The white man makes a law or a rule. Through that rule or law or what you may call it, he takes away the land and then imposes many laws on the people concerning that land and many other things, all without people agreeing first as in the old days of the tribe. Now that man is taken by the same people who made the laws against which that man was fighting. He is tried under those alien rules. Now tell me who is that man who can win even if the angels of God were his lawyers . . . I mean.” (p. 85) As the above passage demonstrates, Njeri is daring in defiance of the tyranny of the white colonialists and the corruption of the lawyers responsible for defending Kenyatta. Despite the restrictions enforced on her by the patriarchal system, she voices her own views, thus rejecting traditional gender roles and moving beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy.

DRAUPADI AS AN EPITOME OF VIOLENCE AGAINST TRIBAL WOMAN: A SOCIO-POLITICAL PHENOMENON

Draupadi first appeared in *Agnigarbha (Womb of Fire)*, a collection of loosely connected, short political narratives. As Mahasweta points out in her introduction to the collection, “Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics.” (Spivak, 4) Later *Draupadi* is included in her short story collection, *Breast Stories*. Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* is a collection of short stories that forms a wonderful meeting-ground for class and gender concerns. Devi’s works expose the legacy of violence that has been passed on into the lives of generations of women. Through the short story *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi portrays the stark picture of a tribal woman whose daily lives are confronted with bodily and psychological struggle, cruelty by the local landlords and poverty in the postcolonial era. It also portrays women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste played out at those different levels of social relationships. . . It is through their bodies, which are abused and used by the landlords, the landlord’s sons, contractors, and others, that they show resistance to this power of patriarchy which assumes the right to do whatever it likes with *tribal* women. These women do

not always use language to protest, but they use their bodies as a voice to express their opposition to their oppressors. Their bodies, tortured and marred, become the venue, the text conveying resistance.

In *Draupadi*, Draupadi or Dopdi Mehjan, aged 27 is a revolutionary activist. Her husband and she, Dulna Majhi played a vital role in the revolutionary movement (Naxalite movement) in India. They were the part of *Operation Bakuli* in 1971. They are wanted by the government and thus they are hiding in underground. Dopdi, the protagonist of the story was running away from the police, but unfortunately caught by them. Two members of their group have betrayed to them and thus it happened. Devi draws this character as the counter-representation of epic character Draupadi from *Mahabharata*. In the epic, Draupadi is the wife of five brothers that gives an idea of only polyandry example in any religious text as Spivak said. However, the manifestation of Draupadi is only limited in religious rites, but not in human life. Her first husband lost the dice-game and stalked what he owns. Draupadi is one of them as the 'material property' who/ what can be sold or exchanged. It is also a matter of fact that her presence in their life is not at all important and thus the enemy chief gets the opportunity to strip her. However, in religion the enemy leader was not able to strip her completely. The enemy chief is not able to strip her as Krishna plays a miracle; "Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped" (Spivak, 12). Her story represents the upper-class story where so-called God is present saving her.

The most pathetic plight of a tribal woman reaches its climax when she (Draupadi)

...pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Spivak, 37)

In Dopdi's life, no God can save her. She is brutally gang-raped and leaving carelessly on the floor. Later, while Senanayak wants to see her, she steps ahead without any clothes. Her uncovered body stands upright in front of Senanayak which makes him uncomfortable. He asks for her clothes, but she denies wearing and said "What's the use of clothes? [...] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed" (Spivak, 37). Her naked body symbolizes the power of marginalized that stops Senanayak to move ahead. In myth, lord Krishna helps Draupadi to be saved where in reality Dopdi cannot be saved rather her uncovered-ravished body protest against male supremacy. She performs the both roles, as marginalized and as a woman. As a woman she becomes the active agent in performing the protest even giving away her 'body'. Similarly, as a marginalized, she becomes an alternative voice to stand out. It is true that her course of action was instructed by Arijit, the leader of a movement; however, it is she who stands against Senanayak. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi is not only as an activist but also as an agent who asserts her own story that challenges the general thought of Indian history.

WRITERS AS CHAMPIONS FOR THE CAUSE OF EDUCATION

Mahasweta Devi and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, being the champions for the cause for education in their respective countries. They stressed on the significance of education for the marginalised children in their works. Education is still remained a dream for many tribal children in India as well as many blacks in Kenya. Ngugi remembers the words Jomo Kenyatta, The Father of Modern Kenya: "Education is the light of Kenya" (Thiong'o, wa Ngugi, 55); the only tool to

change the face of their community. The blacks were denied the right to speech, education and even mere survival. The plight of the tribal girls in the works of Mahasweta Devi's works share a similar predicament. Devi's book, *The Why Why Girl* traces the journey of Moyna, a Shabar tribal girl who was unable to attend the school as she has to attend the household chores can be kept parallel with Njoroge. Ngugi creates awareness among the blacks children about education when he rightly puts in the words of Njoroge:

Education for him, as for many boys of his generation held the key to the future. (55)

.....
 Only education could make something out of this wreckage...Just let him get learning. Let that time come when he... (93)

She, like a subaltern portrays "their conditions of work or education suffer from gender or class discrimination." (Spivak, Gayatri. 215) She does not consider women as a separate entity, but treats their suppression as the oppressions of class and caste.

Mahasweta Devi's writings continued to be the mouth piece for the cause of the most downtrodden and marginalised section of the Indian society. Her novel, *Rudali* describes the lives of two women who develop bondage for survival. It is one of the poignant stories that come from the rural part of Rajasthan, India. Sanichari is a beautiful girl born in a tribal community and her life is filled with suffering and exploitation due to poverty, drunken husband and impish son. In her old age she has become a stone who does not even weep. Though her life is tough, she proved to be strong. She resembles Njoroge's mothers in this regard. They are the symbols of hope.

Ngugi's love for his people is evident when he writes, "although all men were brothers, the black people had a special mission to the world because they were the chosen people of God" (Thiong'o, wa Ngugi. *Weep Not, Child*: 1964, 55-56) *Weep Not, Child* is an important book for audiences around the world to read because it's engaging characters, broad historical scope, and universal themes of perseverance and hope in the face of loss can foster a global awareness by illustrating how people in starkly different circumstances share the same dreams and values.

Ngugi presented his stories not as an outsider but a Kenyan who witnessed the atrocities done to them by the colonialists and voiced against them. He had been to prison owing to the publication of his controversial works *I Will Marry When I want* and *The Devil on the Cross*, for voicing for his native Kenyans against the white settlers, the new masters of their motherland. But Mahasweta Devi presents a different story because despite being a non-Dalit she portrayed the essence of 'dalit' experience. Although an outsider she was one among those writers of Indian literature voiced for the social injustice of the 'subaltern'. She presented the true picture of the most downtrodden and marginalised women so called the 'Dalit's' in the Indian society. She portrayed the stark realities of the lives of tribal women who were exploited sexually, economically and socially in the most brutal way by the upper strata of the society. These women suffer the dual marginalisation of gender and class. She depicted the lives of the tribes of rural places of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. All the short

stories and novels of Mahasweta Devi's prove that she is a true representative of the voice of the subaltern. One of the short stories 'Douloti, the Bountiful' depicted the predicament of the tribal women who were sexually exploited "Douloti is all over the India" (*Imaginary Maps: Three Short stories*: 1995. 160)

Mahasweta Devi has taken the mission of liberating the tribes from the social violence from a caste biased society through her writings. She commented in an interview as response to the question what she would do for the rest of her life, "Fight for the tribal, downtrodden, underprivileged and write if and when I find the time" (1988)

CONCLUSION

As the above argument indicates, this paper has investigated the theoretical aspects underlying Mahasweta Devi's stories and her views on the gender issue and exploitation and its applicability to Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*. As has been pointed out, Devi's obsession with the tribal women experience. Thus, it can be concluded that the writers wrote novels and stories based on historical subjects and also on topics of social and political relevance. Through the works of Mahasweta Devi, she has directed to create a space where the voice of the tribal, the most underprivileged and the most downtrodden sector of the society. Mahasweta Devi and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have played a crucial role in setting up a new paradigm in literature by giving it connectivity with larger political and social concerns. Their writings, both fictional and non-fictional, forcefully articulate the indictment against the 'hegemonic forces persecuting the underdogs.'

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