

MALE EXPLOITATION IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S AAJIR

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi, an eminent Bengali activist writer, focuses on the hard realities of life in the post-Independent Indian content. During the last fifty years of her literary career she has written more than 175 works including novels, novellas, short stories, children stories, Plays, Journalistic writings and biographies. Her works cover a wide variety of subjects. She writes on the problems of the tribal's, untouchables, bonded laborers, share croppers, Prostitutes, shum and the Naxalities. She also writes an superstitions, gender discriminations, history, myth, exploitation of various kinds and corruption at different levels of our system. The aim of this paper is to analyses Mahasweta Devi's play Aait against the social psychologist Erich Fromm's frame work of social character types as mentioned in his seminal work *Man for Himself* (1947). Influenced by Freudian and Marxian perspectives, Fromm describes four types of non-productive orientations in his book: receptive, exploitative, hording, and marketing (45-60). This paper focuses attention on the receptive and exploitative male social character types in Aajir.

Keywords: Exploitation, Oppression, Bonded labour system, Violation, Sub-alternaty

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is considered one of the boldest of Bengal female writers since late 1950s. Mahasweta Devi wrote novels and short storied based on historical subjects as also on topics of social and political relevance, She has brought out the rebellious spirit of the tortured people of the past and the present with a rare blend of fact and fiction. Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali novelist and champion of tribal communities, has won the Magasaysay award for journalism, literature and creative communication.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the India's foremost writers. She is considered as one of the boldest of Bengali Female works. Mahasweta Devi quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, yet her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work. But Mahasweta, like a subaltern, is scrumpitous in her consideration towards women. She does not regard women as separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to "the oppression of class and caste. The women characters in her works are stronger. When compared to men. The men appear to be lacking in insight into what is happening to their being, and remain, for a moment, possive spectators as their counter parts pass through the trying situations created by an equally indifferent establishment. She stands with few equals among today's Asian writers in the dedication and directness with she has turned writing into a form of service to the people.

II. MALE EXPLOITATION IN THE PLAY AAJIR

Mahasweta Devi's Aajir deals with the pathetic plight of Paatan, a slave fro birth. His ancestor Golak Kura, during a famine, signed bond selling himself, his wife Gairabi Dasi, and all his descendants for "perpetual slavery" (Five Plays 37)- to his upper caste landlord Raavan Shunri. The term "aajir" refers to a man who has surrendered himself to bondage for a meager monetary reward. Mahasweta Devi observes that she got the idea for writing Aajir from a slave bond "reproduced in the family history of the Mustafis of Uio-Birnagar" (qtd.in Introduction, Five Plays xii).

In this play, Mahasweta Devi takes us to the rural world exposing another area of exploitation, i.e the bonded labour system. While *Mother of 1084* (1973) deals with the history of the present, *Aajir* (1976) deals with history "for all times". This is a play about a slave called Paatan who is enslaved by an ancient bond and discovers too late that the bond had turned into dust years ago. Hence he is a freeman which he himself does not know. It is a realistic picture of the rural India where the barbaric system of bonded labour has been practice. Mahasweta Devi got the idea for this work from a slave bond executed by slave who sold himself into slavery. This incident was reproduced in the family history of the Mustafis of Ulobirnagar.

In the stratified Indian Society, the people who belonged lower rungs had been denied the right to property, education and the choice of occupation for many centuries. In order to survive, these helpless people had to depend upon the upper- landlords who enjoyed social, economic and political powers. Social oppressions, economic dependence and pressing poverty of their marginalized sections force them to the barbaric bonded labour system.

Mahasweta Devi who has the first hand experience of the prevailing socio-economic and political situations in West Bengal and other neighboring states, has herself witnessed many such inhuman incident which any civilized society should be ashamed of. One of such experience has found an artistic expression in *Aajir* (1976). Having found that an authentic documentation of any such incident is then best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation, Mahasweta Devi tries to document one of the instances of human rights violation. Here, an individual, being a descendant of a family of slaves, is innumerable tortures and reduced to the sub-human status after being denied of his natural right to live, to love and to marry.

Paatan, the protagonist in *Aajir* (1976), like Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), live in a society, which is a great hurdle in his path to freedom and quality. Unlike his predecessors, He denies to submit himself to the oppressive agencies of exploitation. Like Bakha, his every effort to free himself from the clutches of slavery is foiled by the perpetrators of this age-old inhuman practice. In this case of Paatan, the mistress of the landlord deceives him by hiding the fact about the actual condition of the bond that had turned to dust a long ago. She pretends to help him with the intention of getting her sensual pleasures satisfied. She induces him to elope with lure of freedom.

The ignorance and illiteracy in rural West Bengal had driven the marginalized to the eternal servitude. *Aajir* (1976) presents a horrible picture of this real life situation. We find Paatan in a constant conflict with the society that denies him his human existence which he tirelessly craves. He remains unconcerned to all sorts of humiliations and oppressions that his master meted out to him because he was told that his forefather, Golak Kura had sold away himself and his descendants for three rupees. Continuous drought and famine had forced Golak Kura to put thumb impression on a bond which made him and his descendants slaves for ever to Raavan and his descendants. Paatan, being a descendant of Golak Kura, becomes a born slave who has no life, no wife, no son and no joy. They are permanently denied to him. The mistress, a luscious woman who craves for youth, promises him to steal away his *Aajir's* bond from the master and give back to him. Her reference to the gypsies who sell 'magic potions' and her act of brushing against Paatan made him burn with craving.

Aajir (1976) is a realistic play and the stage devices are also employed accordingly. Mahasweta Devi deliberately avoids unnecessary scenic displays of the commercial theatre. Under the influence of Badal Sancar and Beckett, she employs simple and natural theatrical devices that suit her subject matter well. This simple stage set up helps, as E. Satyanarayana writes, "To establish direct connection between the audience and the actors thereby focussing the attention of the former on the point she is trying to drive home through the latter." (The Plays of Devi 49).

In spite of his robust body and animal strength, Paatan is made to submit meekly to his master, Maatang shunri who is comparatively weak. Paatan gets tied to the post and whipped constantly by the master. He is a cruel master and a professional womanizer. He receives constant nagging from his wife for his regular visit to Punnashashi, a prostitute and for his act of dancing before her 'without a stitch' on his back. Moreover, he has failed to satisfy the sexual hunger of his wife and give her a son. Therefore, she secretly longs for the company of the slave, as she finds in him the potency which her husband lacks.

Paatan has to bear all the tortures, humiliations and inhuman treatment because of his belief that the 'aajir's bond' exists. But the indomitable spirit of freedom in him does not let him yield to the circumstances. He constantly craves for a place where there is no master, mistress, villagers, aajir's bond and where the people do not dance in glee at the sight of an aajir's bond. But the supposed aajir's bond comes in the way. He knows that his fate is doomed as long as the bond exists. He is helplessly angry towards the 'bastard Golak Kura', his forefather who had signed the aajir bond for a paltry sum of three rupees and left generations enslaved for life. At one point of time, Paatan wishes to marry only to please the souls of his dead ancestors who have been burning in hell as they are denied the offering of water from their descendants. But Paatan finds no escape. He is unable to free himself of the burden of the convention that has deprived him of all human joys. Having found no way to realize his dream of freedom, Paatan in a fit of anger cries out:

"Hey, you bastards haunting the cremation ground! Why are you so thirsty? weren't you born in the lap of famine, and didn't you die in its lap? Then how can you be thirsty? ... No, I won't many, ever. I won't continue a family of aajirs. You bastard, Golak Kura: for a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir's bond and left generations enslaved for life. I'll bring your line to an end. If there's no death for aajir's bond, I will finish it off with my-death." (Five Plays 48)¹²

The desperate Paatan would like to put an end to the aajir bond with his death. With that he would like to put an end to the continuing slavery. The element of irony runs throughout the play. The entire action of the play, that involves torture, agony desperation and craving for freedom, revolves around the supposed bond. But

in reality there exists no bond at all. The Master beats and tortures Paatan only to hide the facts about his bondage. The Master, whom his wife calls 'an old dotard' and 'a bloody eunuch', visits the prostitute regularly. He failed to quench the sexual desire of his wife. The mistress, with the sensual fire bunting within, craves for Paatan. But the long servitude and torturous experiences made Paatan to forget women and sex.

The mistress provokes Paatan to act and introduces him to a gipsy woman who deals with potions that may release him from the bondage. But when Paatan runs away with the "gipsy woman, she lets loose her men on him with the fear of losing him forever. Her men drag him back and beat him brutally. The mistress craves for Paatan to get her sexual desire fulfilled which her husband has failed her. So she is not ready to lose him and behaves unusually creating confusion in Paatan. Later, she raises his hope once again with her sympathetic words and promises to set him free by stealing away the supposed bond from the chest. So he agrees to elope with her without bothering about the consequences. Paatan does not believe when the mistress tells him the fact that there is no aajir bond as the bond long turned to dust. The desperate Paatan becomes recklessly aggressive. He doubts conspiracy by the mistress and strangles her to death. In this regard E. Satyanarayana observes:

"Ironically enough, the mistress who rouses the animal desire latent in Paatan to quench her insatiable hunger for sex, falls prey to her own wicked designs. In a sense, this unethical act of hers is both — yet another form of exploitation and revolt against patriarchal system." (The Plays of Mahasweta Devi 62)"

When the master confirms the facts regarding the non-existence of the bond, Paatan becomes more assertive and realizes his ignorance of the fact that he is a free man like everyone else in the world and the mistress, 'the luscious women' was for him. But he did not know these things. This is the supreme irony of the situation with all its poignancy.

Mahasweta Devi experienced "an urge and an obligation to document" the "suffering spectators of India". This social responsibility has triggered her to make an expose of this silent abyss of subalternity. In her play Aajir, the protagonist fails to realize the essence of freedom and blindly adheres to his slavery bestowed by his ancestors. Slavery symbolises the conditions of subalternity which binds the individual to the constraints of the authoritarian structure within the nation. The play opens with Paatan's wailing about his predicament. He and his wife Gairabi Dasi have been sold away years ago by his ancestors for "rupees three" during the terrible famine. Slavery becomes an inheritance and Paatan is bestowed the title of "aajir" and denied the right to marriage. When he yearns to have a wife, the mob reminds him that:

The world's not for you Aajir"
The gipsy woman's not for you.
As long as Aajir's bond's there,
You are just a maimed beast,
And Maatang's your God.
The gipsy woman's not for you.
The world's not for you
Life's not for, you.

III. CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi said that The illiteracy of the exploited class hinders their urge for freedom, and restraints them to conventional duties and obligations. Paatan is shocked to disbelief, when Maatang tells him that neither he nor his father has seen the bond, as it has been reduced to dust. Paatan, in a fit of frenzy, kills the mistress for not giving him the bond and finally cries out: was a freeman and I alone didn't know". The existence of a bond, which Paatan is made to believe, becomes a metaphor for the continual process of exploitation in India. In Aajir, Mahasweta Devi portrays the irrecoverableness of the subaltern consciousness, due to the over-determined subalternity in the Indian social structure.

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