
SOCIAL DYNAMICS, REPRESSION AND VIOLENCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *AAJIR*

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Abstract: Indian English drama is a general term that encompasses Indian plays written in English as well as plays produced in local languages and translated into English. In the postcolonial situation, to write drama in English was considered to be politically incorrect because English was considered as the language of the ruler. The art of Indian drama enjoyed a prestigious status in ancient India. However, the practice of Indian drama in spite of its roots in classical traditions was developed only during the British period in India. It was encouraged by Western dramatic influences and also by native theatrical traditions of India. Taking inspiration from the subaltern personalities, Mahasweta Devi also formed her literary niche under this brand or umbrella. The subaltern strength of mind in her plays on tribal life speaks in various voices which are neither in unison nor in any unified form. The tone and tenor of the voices in all the five plays the researcher has chosen for his study are diverse in various aspects. *Aajir* has realistically portrayed the turbulence and turmoil in the heart of a bonded slave who is held so for being a descendant of a family of slaves. *Aajir*, like *Douloti*, too depicts how the ignorant, illiterate rustics on account of poverty fall prey to exploitation and lead a life of eternal servitude. The story has been adapted into a powerful play by Mahasweta Devi herself.

Keywords: *Aajir*, Indian Drama, English Literature.

Introduction: Mahasweta Devi explores and decries the anti-democratic policies of Independent India that keep alive the old and decayed system of caste, creed, and untouchability of de-notified communities. She depicts the real picture of a Postcolonial nation where the subaltern is alienated from the mainstream. Thus, both society and state, through power and supremacy attempted to curb their rights and end the existence of the underprivileged, even to the extent of depriving them of their right to life. Mahasweta Devi had taken a stand and initiated a powerful literary discourse to give voice to the voiceless people like Paatan in the play *Aajir*. The voices of the oppressed, dispossessed, landless, marginalised people all over the world have been silenced on the issue of exploitation over the years. Since the days of colonisation, both internal and external, there have been sporadic, isolated attempts by the colonised subjects to resist the colonial exploitation and its racist attitudes in various forms. In course of time, the sporadic voices got consolidated in the form of literary expression by socially committed writers like Mahasweta Devi.

This is very obvious while analysing the character of Paatan in the play *Aajir* (1976-77). In this play, the pathetic condition and anguish of a bonded labourer are very well visualized where Mahasweta has realistically penned the barbaric socio-economic realities of a person whose forefather had sold himself and his generations for

a paltry amount – a slavery that denies him the right to love and marriage. Being an intensely committed social activist, she worked for the oppressed and exploited subalterns and tribals, her primary endeavour is to break the stereotype images about the tribal and to know their practices as well as recognise and honour them. She committed herself to work on newer dimensions of caste and class oppression through the representation of slavery and bonded labour. They are the people steeped in ignorance and trampled under the hegemony of the feudal landlords. She strongly believed that caste is always identified with class but at the same time, makes a plea to her readers not to think in the way she thinks but find it on their own. She had chosen to keep certain social, economic, political and psychological realities at the centre of her creative vision.

Devi does not propose a direct solution by playing the advocate for any cause; rather what she does is to bear witness through the environment of her story, which is an inseparable part of her activism. She unfolds this brutal truth in the second scene of the first act. The moment the curtain rises on a dark stage, Paatan, the '*Aajir*' enters and addresses the audience directly to highlight the central issue of the play – bonded slavery. He curses Golak Kura, his forefather, for enslaving his life and forcing him to become a bonded slave. Mahasweta Devi has a spectroscopic view of the character of *Aajir* where he represents the social, cultural,

religious, philosophical and political dynamics of contemporary Indian society where the fight of the downtrodden or the voiceless is a mainstream subject. This kind of suffering is visible when Paatan introduces himself in the very opening act of the play.

Paatan: Sirs, my dear Sirs, I'm an aajir. Ages ago, in the hoary past, there was once a terrible famine in the tracts of our Ayodhya hills. And then...myforefather Golak Kura, To save his life... (Pauses, then in a wail, in prose) sold himself and his wife GairabiDasi away for only three rupees... He sold away all his descendants too at once... Watch, gentlemen, how a man becomes a slave from birth (45).

For Devi, writing is a manoeuvre of her social, cultural and political programmes of action. Poverty, starvation, subjugation, corruption and hierarchical domination in contemporary India enabled her to action and literature. On several occasions, she expressed the view that even thirty-one years after achieving independence, people are still groaning under the yoke of hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. Luminous, burning and passionate anger, directed against a system that has failed to liberate the marginalised people from these terrible constraints, is the fountain of inspiration for all her writings. Mahasweta Devi's contribution to literature is an outcome of her social activism and a commitment towards the underprivileged and the demoted. Her perception and outlook on the life of the miserable mankind give Aajir a new dimension different from other plays.

Aajir has realistically portrayed the turbulence and turmoil in the heart of a bonded slave who is held so for being a descendant of a family of slaves. Aajir, like Douloti, too depicts how the ignorant, illiterate rustics on account of poverty fall prey to exploitation and lead a life of eternal servitude. The story has been adapted into a powerful play by Mahasweta Devi herself. Before the play starts, a voice repeats thrice: 'The term aajir stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum.' The sheer repetition of this line immediately captures the attention of the audience. The entire focus of the play is on the social evil of bonded labour and the predicament of that section of humanity, which is subjected to inhuman exploitation and brutal treatment on account of poverty.

Mahasweta Devi's theatre is reminiscent of the power inherent in theatre movements like the epic theatre. Much in the same manner, such as

the celebrated epic style, she also incorporates songs, which go a long way in sensitizing the audience and provoking them to think. It is evident from the words of the callous mob through the following lines:

"The world's not for you.

The gipsy woman's not for you.

As long as the aajir's bond is there,

You're 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" (46).

The song brings to the fore the state of bonded slaves who are subjected to interminable suffering. These songs foreground the hideous realities underlying the social setup and expose the real character of a hollow society. The unmitigated suffering of the subjugated and the barbaric ways of the oppressor, reflect the determinism of the forces, which have ruled society for centuries.

Caste cannot be precisely acknowledged with class in Indian civilization; however, the caste hierarchies matter significantly to the class divisions. Outcaste and low caste folks are harshly marginalized by social constraints obligatory to them. These constraints are labelled as revered, holy and inviolable and hinder their escalating movement. In addition, the discrimination of gender increases the condition of oppression and dominance. An untouchable male is repressed as low class and outcaste while an untouchable female is repressed doubly, by males of her caste and by males and females of the higher classes. Mythologies and legends have customarily been formed and set up since olden times to impose the class and caste hierarchies and divisions of upper castes and lower castes. In Aajir, the playwright deconstructs these categorized divisions and demystifies some prevailing myths. They are manifestations of the privileged socio-cultural politics by divulging them as discriminatory and biased.

Gayatri Spivak observes, "Mahasweta Devi has always been gripped by the individual in history – the history is more in terms of the effect of the 'real' than the real" (Spivak, 2010: 113). In that essay, Spivak quotes Barthes who said, "History is a large amorphous text consisting of various and often disparate accounts mediated through historians or interpreters" (1998: 95). Hence history is as fictional as creative writing, reminding the notion of New Historicism that has endeavoured to exterminate the difference

between history and literature. Her works as chronicles of contemporary time and of the past interconnected to the present wish to document the existing history. Consequently, in her writings, history and text reciprocate, as Louis A. Montrose puts, “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of text and textuality of history” (Montrose, 1989: 20).

Aajir realistically portrays an image of the rural India where the unruly custom of bonded labour exists. In fact, this custom has its origin in the Varna (caste) structure. Aryan civilization has

been classified into four Varnas – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The fourth category of Shudra Varna was marginalised as low caste and deprived of the right to assets, education, and profession. For survival, they were reduced to depend on the high castes. This entire dependency of Shudra on Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya castes diminished their position to that of slaves. According to Mahasweta Devi, even in contemporary India, the bonded labourers continue to remain as low caste or outcaste.

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