



A Leap into Gender Identity in *Statue and The Hunt*: Recalling the Legendary Writer of Short Fiction, *Mahasweta Devi*.

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ABSTRACT

After paying a respectful homage to one of the greatest Bengali women writers, Mahasweta Devi who left for her heavenly abode on July 28, 2016, the present paper attempts to critically review subaltern gender, caste and class representations in her short stories “Statue” from *Old Women* and “The Hunt” from *Imaginary Maps* translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Primarily, the paper proposes to bid a prayerful adieu to Devi by recalling her literary contribution for she had worked tirelessly to recreate space for the Indian marginalized women. Through a comparative analysis revealed in the feminist-consciousness, the paper examines three major issues that concern subaltern women, namely: gender, caste and class inequalities. The contention of the article is how Devi has strived hard to reconstruct the subject of the subaltern by decolonizing and contextualizing the harsh realities of Indian women under gender constraints. The focus is on how the writer has endeavored in her “Statue” and “The Hunt” to restore the tarnished image of women by universalizing ethnic issues that cause exploitation.

Key Words: Subaltern, Gender, Postcolonial, Decolonization, Representation, Spaces, Subjectivity and Identity.

Mahasweta Devi is a legendary figure among the Indian postcolonial women writers. The following day of her demise on 28 July, 2016, *The Hindu* paper recalled her as ‘the most respected social activist who lent her voice to the poor.’ The writer’s mortal remains can be uprooted from this earth but not her spirit that wanted to work for the dispossessed. It can be proved in Antara Dev Sen’s article, “Indefatigable Chronicler of the Oppressed” which recorded Devi’s words “I don’t want to die. I want to live forever.” (11) The reason for Devi’s desire to live was to fight for a cause. The ‘Eastern Light of Bengal’ is not extinguished rather, it lives in the hearts of these neglected, in the pages of history and literature. Her soul will rest in peace only if postcolonial India can reach the “benefits of decolonization to the poorest of the poor.” (*Imaginary Maps* xi) Till her last breath her voice had spoken for the hundreds of countrymen living in darkness of poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, displacement and other evils caused by exploitation. She was a beacon of light to ‘Kheria’, ‘Mundas’,

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'Shabors', and 'Lodhas'. Her stories "Jhansir Rani", "Mother of 1084", "Bayen" "Statue", "Rudali" and "Draupadi" are the living literary monuments that sustain the generations of rural women to stand for their basic rights despite gender discrimination.

In her stories, Devi examines socio-economic and political factors responsible to create caste, class and gender discrimination and exploitation of the marginalized. It can be examined in "Statue" and "The Hunt" how above said factors were responsible in creating gender discrimination of the subaltern. The woman protagonists, Pishi (Dulali) and Mary Oraon are untouchables and victims of caste, class and gender who recapture their entire lives as marginalized women. Both the stories having a single plot, a single theme and a single character delineated in the third person narrative, portray the struggles of the women in recreating their authentic identity in a gender biased society. If Pishi reminisces her challenging youthful life as Dulali to counter patriarchy, Mary Oraon looks at her life that struggled for economic freedom and social mobility by trespassing gender marginality and community practices. Here, Devi looks at the position of women as M. N Srinivas has stated in his essay "The Changing Position of Indian Women" from the "actual relationship between men and women and their dynamics over a period of time in their local communities." (137)

Pishi's gender exploitation has led her to a life of poverty, hunger, destitution and ostracism which she recalls at the age of seventy eight. It can be supported from the following lines, "with her belly always empty or three-quarters empty, there is nothing left in her body. She likes the fire's warmth and for lack of blood feels chilled all the time." ("Statue" 14). All her thoughts and dreams revolve around sustenance and she recalls her entire life of misery and pain with a cry for existence. Her memory recalls those unpleasant moments to reflect how she had questioned her perpetrators by transgressing exploitative yardsticks. The haunting story of the woman is recreated to explore how women struggle against gender oppression till the end.

The trait is similar in "The Hunt" when Mary Oraon, an illegitimate tribal girl protests the patriarchal standards and cultural codes of the upper caste Brahmins. Her desire to seek freedom from gender, caste and class discrimination can be witnessed when she counters the 'mainstream' and a powerful agency, Tehsildar. When she is denied of her basic rights, she fights with all her strength. It can be supported with Devi in her "The Author in Conversation" stating, "When the system fails an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. An individual cannot go on suffering in silence." (*Imaginary Maps* xviii) Mary Oraon dismantles gender theory as a woman of tribal *Kuruda Community* when she is denied of her justice and revolts against the village customs particularly 'Jaani Parab, an 'animal hunt festival.' Despite her gender, creed, caste and class determined roles as the daughter of an *Oraon* -an outcaste, Mary creates her identity and resolves to counter the social beliefs by questioning its standards and marrying Jalim, a Muslim vendor. It signifies Mary Oraon's inner freedom for self-expression cannot be smothered. Even though she is an outcaste, yet has her individual status, which can be observed in the following:

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the *station* like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. Jalim

the leader of the marketers and a sharp lad is her chosen mate. They will marry when either's savings reach a hundred rupees. ("The Hunt" 3)

The stories begin by representation of rural dispossessed women and delineating the true picture of the patriarchal, superstitious, uneducated and caste-ridden Indian villages. Devi narrates the stories in the feminist-consciousness to capture the misery and inhuman treatment meted out to the Indian unrecognized women in caste-ridden and gender-discriminated *Bhunya* and *Oraon* communities. The contrasting elements reveal that if Dulali becomes a victim of child marriage at the age of four and widow at six, Mary Oraon is an outsider by birth when "Dixon's son came he put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left. He went to Australia." (The Hunt" 2) From their childhood, the women are led into a life of perennial sadness and enforced to live in misery. As a victim of exploitation Dulali is marked as misfortunate and "rather than kill her physically they kept her in a room raised on the yard's far end" ("Statue" 12) and Mary is forced to "pasture the Prasads' cattle." ("The Hunt" 2)

Devi's art of delineating the evils of patriarchal Indian society is vivid and precise. Primarily, Devi as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* unveils the gender factor responsible for the marginalization of rural and dalit women. It can be supported by the statement of M. N. Srinivas in his essay "The Changing Position of Indian Women" that "there is an interest among the feminists to attack the theory of the biological determinism of women to trying to understand the processes which have resulted in their widespread subjection." (137) The stories are symmetrically constructed with lucidity and clarity to recreate gender identities of women. As Ramakrishnan has pointed out, the short story "makes it an ideal medium for recovering the voice of the marginalized, the oppressed and the dispossessed." ("Fictionalising India" xvi) The emotional struggles of the unspoken women are fluently portrayed in the stories. The literary ability in Devi's stories as Santwana Bhattacharya in his article, "A Feisty writer of Bengali Prose" states "she has the same ability to play with the temporality and to bring the unknown past as a living presence within contemporary reality so as to produce a unique brand of literary history." (9) "Statue" is revealed through the voice of an old woman, Pishi (the young Dulali) who brings out her past with vivid reality. As a postcolonial writer, Devi reconstructs the unknown and hidden emotions of Indian women in both stories. Pishi and Mary Oraon's past is recreated to portray how downtrodden women bore injustice all their lives due to gender inequalities and caste marginalization. The women face double-marginalization under their own community men and the upper caste communities.

Devi represents the lives of these women to see how they try to solve their daily problems in different ways and are able to recreate their identities. It can be supported with what Shashi Deshpande in her essay, "Why I am a Feminist" states: "... the female of the species has the same right to be born and to survive, to fulfil herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential that lies within her, as the male has." (83) The old woman in "Statue" collects the pots that are left at Manosha's shrine and sometimes steals lentils from others' compound. She wanders in the dense jungle of the Thakur homestead and eats whatever she gets. In this socially secluded state, her mind bubbles with complicated thoughts, "From earliest consciousness she remembers that she was at once unwanted and indispensable in the household....Does she belong to this house? If close kin, then why outcast? If not kin, then why is she in the house? If the decision is not to feed her, then why give? If one feels like feeding, why give such a small

amount of rice?" ("Statue" 13-14) In these interrogative modes combined with pauses, commas and ellipses, the writer subtly highlights through a unique conversational style the two-fold exploitation of downtrodden women. In her old age, Pishi realizes that as time passes for a woman, the ideology of love remains a memory but she never acknowledges defeat even in her dire poverty and starvation. She potently questions gender inequalities meted out to the lower caste women in the spirit of recreating her own self. Similarly, Mary Oraon's desire for self-identity can be discussed from various angles. She aspires for economic freedom by saving "a hundred rupees" ("The Hunt"4) before the marriage and asserts her social freedom by setting up a shop in *Tohri* market. Her struggle against gender, caste, creed and class discrimination never deter her in asserting her dignity. Although, she is stigmatized as a poor and a lower caste woman, she never compromises in her pursuit for freedom and mobility. It can be examined how Devi portrays the stories of Pishi and Mary Oraon as the perfect metaphor for manifold gender and caste concerns.

Sudipta Datta, in his article "Tearing the Curtain of Darkness", highlights that the stories of Devi are the "journey of her female protagonists' self discovery and their place in a feudal world." (9) Dulali's self-discovery starts in the feudal community, *Thakurs* when she expresses her "unrequited love" ("Statue" 18) for Dinudayal Thakur which is revealed through a letter written by him before his hanging for his revolutionary activities. Dulali's past is creatively narrated through the researcher's thesis on a revolutionary martyr and her lover, Dinu. The love story between Dinudayal and Dulali is their attempt to transgress gender, caste and class determined roles. Devi tries to dismantle binary oppositions between man/woman, Bhunya/Thakur, Kuruda/Brahmins, and upper caste/ lower caste. Here Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay, "Under the Western Eyes" can be cited to see how the "women are discriminated under various cultural and ethnic contexts." ("Under the Western eyes")

The stories can be argued as modern allegories that reckon with some of the main questions disturbing native tribal women in the postcolonial India. Through the characters of a tribal women, Devi portrays socio-religious, traditional ethos and other inhuman practices perpetuated by patriarchy. Mary Oraon is examined as a tribal woman who expresses social deviancy to rebel against these gender factors especially, "animal hunting festival" by demanding justice for a sexual crime committed against the entire tribal women. By destroying the evil instincts of her oppressor, Tehsildar she expresses her desire to transgress her society. It is an example for the women of the lower caste in the rural community who assert their individuality. It is also an act of aggression that Mary employs to empower other women of her caste, creed and gender group. It illustrates how Mary recreates an eternal myth as the defender of the marginalized women in the "animal hunting festival". The story ends with a triumph of a subaltern woman.

Devi in "Statue" and "The Hunt" presents a sensitive, delicately-drawn portrait of Pishi and Mary Oraon at the same time delineating the socio-economic and political oppression within which the women of the lower caste are forced to survive. The stories highlight the ethical risks that were staked when privileged intellectuals, like Thakurs and Brahmins, made political claims on behalf of the oppressed group. A priority between gendering and the ideology of national liberation are also delineated in "Statue". It brings out the unpleasant truth that national liberation has ended up as both a tragedy and a farce. In the portrayal of the women, Pishi and Mary Oraon the writer questions the socio-political inequalities related to the neglected sections

of society and their struggle to attain the right of equality in independent India. She also questions urbanization, economic and social mobility reaching the Indian rural women.

Devi like other women writers does not seem to write her stories on international dilemmas and issues. But, her rural subaltern parables reach international fame which makes her pen mightier than the sword and sharper than the razor. The remarkable presentation on the predicament of the marginalized existence in “Statue” and “The Hunt” on a gender, caste and class-ridden society and an enduring stamina of the women to surpass all their struggles are noteworthy. It can be supported with Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan in her essay, “Real and Imagined Women” that “the manipulative structures are made of multiple societies which have varied forms of social stratification and patriarchal domination in its class, caste and racial structure.” (308) In this manner, female modes of discussion have differed and localized the women to study in their situational progress. Like her other women-focused stories “Statue” and “The Hunt” rest extensively on the colonial history and its impact on rural subaltern. Pishi and Mary Oraon can be as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “A proper name to a generalized margin.” (*Outside the Teaching Machine* 60) It signifies that they are able to recreate their identity.

An analysis of the subaltern characters, Pishi and Mary Oraon through a brief interpretation of the socio-economic struggles of the Indian poor revealed in the stories could lead to a different mode for study. Besides looking at binary positions of male/female, urban/rural, rich/poor, caste/outcaste, Thakurs/ Bhunyas, Brahmins/Kurudas, the stories can also be studied within the female narratives to unfold marginalized women’s psyche. A leap into the subaltern female-consciousness puts Pishi and Mary Oraon in their own local situations where the real growth of the subaltern could be noticed within their collective effort. Their identity grows within the narratives and the struggle for emancipation can be focused in a unique mode.

This paper has brought out a part of the vision to suggest an alternative outlook on the marginalized position of Indian women in the patriarchal domain. It should be analyzed with those basic rights of ordinary rural women who are neglected, ignored and exploited by gender marginality. The subaltern women empowered by Devi have grown in their formative roles in various contexts. The stories have located the analysis of the neglected to present the real contexts of their existence and the need for their empowerment. The voiceless figures of Pishi and Mary Oraon have their own consciousness that grows along with their stories. So, the subaltern gender narratives revealed in “Statue” and “The Hunt” are the representation of the subaltern identity which consists of a female-consciousness and their struggle to redefine their identity. Like Mudhupalani’s *Radhika Santwanam*, it can be seen how the writer has argued that women’s sensuality is central by celebrating the pleasures and emotions of the rural women. It has justified the claim of a subaltern woman identity as Devi’s narrative “Statue” and “The Hunt” speak about the position of woman in a downtrodden and gender discriminatory society.

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