

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DALITS: THE PROTESTER AGAINST CASTE VULNERABILITY

Ms. Richa

Assistant Professor

VCTM, Aligarh. Resi Address- 1/291, Surendra Nagar, Near Singhal Sadan,
Aligarh

Abstract:

In the discourse of vulnerability, the awareness of the identity of dalits and untouchables has been a significant subject of literary representation. This rising subject of literature presents a challenge to the oppressive mechanism of the main stream because literature has been a powerful instruments to aware the under-privileged section of the society against the unhealthy practices of social system. As a result of this awareness in the post-colonial literature, it has become a passion for many writers to make literature as a voice of the weak and vulnerable because this marginalized group live an isolated life and forced to bear the burden of the hegemony of ruling class. Among these creative writers who raise the issue of weaker section of society in their writing, Mahasweta Devi is one of them who had the passion for the suffering of these marginalized people which is presented in most of her writings. She wrote many plays, novels, short stories etc. where she exhibits her interest to represent the voice of the marginalized and try to bring them from 'margin' to 'centre'.

In the play 'Water', Mahasweta Devi depicts the plight of the life of dalits and untouchables. In this process of investigation, she indicates that they are socially neglected, politically oppressed, psychologically subjugated and deprived from the privilege to live a life of main-stream. Further, she asserts that they are weak and powerless and have no voice and vision of their own. She also finds that they are enslaved and puppet of the power mechanism. But her depiction of the life of dalits and untouchables is not for press-politics. It is only to change the outlook of the society towards them for the good fortune of the entire humanity. Hence, the literary representation of the life of dalits and untouchables in her play 'Water' presents a challenge to caste centric mechanism that includes the history of oppressive system of casteism. But this idea of dalits consciousness of Mahasweta Devi has been condemned by most of the main-stream writers who tried to maintain their autonomy in the treatment of the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

life of dalits. In spite of this, she continuously raises the issue of vulnerable class in her writings.

In her play 'Water', Mahasweta Devi exposed the whole idea of dalits in the background of the distribution of water from the river 'Charsa'. Hence, in this play, water has become a major metaphor, representing the crisis of survival of man against man made convention of caste, creed, race, and religion. In this play Maghai and his son Dhura are the representative of the community of dalits who were denied to draw the water from the river 'Charsa' and were refused from their right of survival in the main-stream of life, in spite of being a water diviner. In contrast of the marginality of these two innocent dalits, Santosh pujari is projected as an image of Brahministic power. Jiten, the teacher is the only rational and enlightened individual who appears to articulate the voice of downtrodden people and do a lot of efforts to stir the consciousness of dalits against oppressive power mechanism.

In this play, Maghai and Dhura represent the voice and vision of two generation of dalits. Maghai, in spite of having a realization of his dalit identity accepts his position as a downtrodden section of society but his son Dhura's vision was radical in this play because of his proceeding at the path of war. Here, Maghai is hurt and Dhura is angry. But with the help of his wife phulmani, Maghai also realizes his hidden power and stood against the old mechanism of the society who suppresses the self-dignity of this downtrodden section of society. In the end of the play after sacrificing his life with seventeen others followers, he takes his revenge from the people who represent the oppressive system of society by being carried his body through rushing and flowing water of river 'Charsa' from which he was denied to take water because of being a part of vulnerable caste.

Thus, in the end of the play 'Water', Mahasweta Devi shows a divine justice for these untouchables through Maghai by raising their voice against social injustice and tries to reconstruct their lost identity. Thus, with her radical and humanitarian vision, Mahasweta Devi used literature to represent the protest of dalits and untouchables against their vulnerability and takes efforts to bring them in the main-stream of life.

Keywords: dalits, caste, against, self-dignity etc

RESEARCH ARTICLE

In the discourse of vulnerability, literature besides its immense aesthetic and ethical value has become a powerful instrument to get aware the silent sufferers, dalits and untouchables and raises their voice against the prejudices and unhealthy practices of social system. Now-a-days the voice of protest against the old mechanism of main-stream has become a rising subject of the post-colonial literature. Therefore, this significant subject for the identity of the under-privileged sections of society has become a passion for many post-modern writers. And among those post-modern writers who raise the issues of the weaker section of the society in their writing, Mahasweta Devi is one of them who had the passion for the suffering of the marginalized people which is presented in most of her writing. She wrote many plays, novels, short stories etc. where she exhibits her interest to represent the voice of the vulnerable and tries to bring them from 'margin' to 'centre'.

In the play 'Water', Mahasweta Devi depicts the plight of the life of dalits and untouchables. In this process, she investigates that they are socially neglected, politically oppressed and psychologically subjugated. They are weak and powerless and have no voice and vision of their own. They are enslaved in such a way that they remain unmindful even at the level of their bodily ego. Foucault, the eminent post-colonial critic argues:

Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing or exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are also the elements of its articulation. In other words; individuals are like vehicles of power, not its points of application.¹

Likewise, in the absence of awareness, these vulnerable sections of society can neither understand nor respond the power politics used by those people who are holding the position in 'centre'. Like Mahasweta Devi, Nandy accepts that in the process of marginality, human identity is ignored and neglected. They are rendered mentally cripple to resist the forces of oppression. They have neither the will nor the voice to register their identity and rights. It is the conviction of Nandy, the post-colonial critic that colonialism leads not only to social margins but it also marginalizes the self and identity. To quote:

This colonialism colonizes mind in addition to bodies and it release forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, I help to generalize the concept of the modern west from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in mind.²

RESEARCH ARTICLE

In this process of the investigation of the life of dalits, Mahasweta Devi's emphasis remains on the social condition of dalits and their subsequent mental acceptance of slavery and injustice. Like her, Om Prakash Valmiki has the realization that the life of dalits implies the predicament of entire humanity. He admits:

If the non-dalits are unfamiliar with the burning miseries of Dalit life, it is because of the distance between Dalits and non-dalits that has been created by the Indian Social order. When they do not know the reality of this Dalit life, whenever they write about it will remain superficial, born out of pity and sympathy and not out of a desire for change or repentance.³

Hence, the literary representation of the life of dalits and untouchables in the play 'Water' presents a challenge to caste centric mechanism that includes the history of oppressive system of casteism. But this idea of dalits consciousness of Mahasweta Devi has been condemned by most of the main-stream writers who try to maintain their autonomy in the treatment of the life of dalits. In spite of this, she continuously raises the issues of vulnerable class in her writings. Like her, Om Prakash Valmiki, the eminent dalit writer in his assertion of the idea of dalits mentions:

Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also like a culture and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayals of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits.⁴

In her play 'Water', Mahasweta Devi exposed the whole idea of dalits in the background of the distribution of the water from the river 'Charsa'. Hence, in this play, water has become a major metaphor representing the crisis of the survival of man against man made convention of caste, creed, race and religion. Sharan Kumar Limble declares:

Freedom is the highest aesthetic value... Equality, freedom, justice, and love are basic sentiments of people and society. They are many times more important than pleasure and beauty.⁵

In this play, Maghai and his son Dhura are the representative of the community of dalits who were denied to draw the water from the river 'Charsa' and were refused from the right of their survival in the main-stream of life, in spite of being a water diviner who search the water for the people of main-stream. In contrast of the marginality of these two innocents dalits, Santosh pujari is projected as an image of Brahministic power. But here, Jiten, the teacher is

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the only rational and enlightened individual who appears to articulate the voice of the downtrodden people and does a lot of efforts to stir the consciousness of dalits against the oppressive power mechanism. Memmi, the social critic accepts that with the reconstruction of self-awareness of dalits, the chains of vulnerability break and the subjugated subjects assume new identity and position in the society. He confesses:

And the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now, I do demonstrate it: this is not the way it happens. The colonized lives for a long time before we see that really new man.⁶

In this play, Maghai and Dhura represent the voice and vision of two generations of dalits. Maghai, in spite of having a realization of his dalit identity accepts his position as a downtrodden water diviner who is not allowed to touch the water of river 'Charsa' by the power mechanism. He admits, "They wouldn't allow us to touch it. Even at the government well, we are not allowed to draw water."⁷

But, here his son Dhura's vision is radical and he precedes the path of war. He declares that his father, Maghai Dome, a water diviner spots the place of water beneath the earth but Santosh pujari manages to dig the well and imposes his authority on the sources of water. He asks his father:

You serve santosh as his water diviner, he grabs all the water, and then why do you have to starve? Anyway still go on diving water for him, fasting to purify yourself, and then decked in new clothes? Why?⁸

He further asks him:

Why does father have to act the water-diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him to? And for him, the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher, and he'd throw away the water. That's how he treats us. Doesn't he? Tell me that.⁹

This misery of Dhura constitutes the voice of revolt and rebellion and takes a rational view. He registers his protest against the injustice of the people like Santosh pujari and creates a revolt among the young men as well. He declares, "Now we know the kind of man Santosh is. I can tell you, he won't live forever."¹⁰ Encouraging by the views of Dhura, one of his followers asserts, "We've gone over all that, Dhura. The castes, upper and lower don't mean a thing. They are labels designed by men. The constitution's clear on that. But who cares to uphold the constitution?"¹¹

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Later, Maghai with the help of his wife Phulmani who is also not ready to surrender herself before the unhealthy social mechanism realizes his hidden power and stands against the old mechanism of the society who suppresses the self-dignity of the downtrodden sections of the society. Here, Schillar in his observation on the human potential admits that divine sparks are essentially hidden in the human consciousness. He asserts:

Each individual human being, one might say, carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life's task to be, through all his changing manifestations in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.¹²

Here, Maghai gathers his spiritual strength with his wife Phulmani and with new confidence tells Santosh Pujari that they are not ready to take contaminated water from panchayat well and will not allow the cattle of high caste to be washed there. Here, Mahasweta Devi shows that the voice of imploration converts into the voice of protest. He declares, "I am one of Dome caste. We have been told that there's no untouchability in our subdivision, and yet Santosh-Bahu, you, your caste brother and your relations won't let us draw water from any well."¹³ In spite of the voice of resistance, Santosh is not ready to get rid of the Brahministic chauvinism. On the legal front, he denies the practice of untouchability but in reality he does not hesitate to mention, "Maghai we worship our gods in our homes and you eat pigs and fowl. Now tell me isn't the water polluted if you touch it."¹⁴ Here, Mahasweta Devi shows that it is an irony that Maghai is a cause of water in Charsa but he himself is deprived of the pleasure of the sources of water. But in contrast of the social prejudice of Santosh Pujari, Maghai emerges with a more rational and practical vision of life. He confesses:

What can I say? In June, when the Charsa overflows its banks, you bathe in its water, so do we, and the water remains unpolluted.¹⁵

In the process of the protest of Maghai, Jiten, a teacher plays a huge role to articulate the voice of the vulnerable caste. He wants to establish that education can be a potent device to bring a radical reformation in the society and can eliminate the caste vulnerability. This proposal of education for the voice of vulnerable caste has been accepted by Maghai's son Dhura. He promises, "We will. Our children will study, become educated. We'll make schools for you. (Addressing the villagers) there is no lack of children in our homes sends them to school."¹⁶ Further, Jiten demands a new well for the community of Domes for showing their right on the sources of water and wants to remove the crisis of water for them. He informs the SDO who represents the authority of police that Santosh Pujari will not be permitted to take water from this new well. But SDO in spite of his legal power expresses his helplessness to

RESEARCH ARTICLE

implement the law for the better security of dalits. This confession of SDO suggests that administration is also not very conscious for the betterment of the community of Dalits. He says, “I can’t do a thing. If it hurts you to see the plight of the lower caste, why don’t you get transferred to patul? It’s a prosperous village, with an upper caste majority.”¹⁷ Here, Santosh pujari tries to suppress the voice of Jiten by advising him to take his amount of share from the relief grant. But it fires violence and rage in Jiten. He raises his voice against the helplessness of SDO and the cunningness of Santosh pujari. He says:

“Why don’t you? It’s the villages that constitute India. The flood and drought are nature’s curse. But leaving all those victims of flood and drought to mercy of Santosh...”¹⁸

With the water crisis of vulnerable caste, Maghai being a member of Dome community becomes anxious to find out the way to redeem this problem of water for them. He starts meditating the plan for the construction of a new dam that can hold the water back. This idea of the construction of a new dam for dalits becomes a challenge to the authority of Santosh pujari who on the legal front supports the idea of dam but in reality he wants to oppose the idea of a construction of a new dam. A very ironical situation emerges when Santosh as a self-defense support the idea of dam but all in one voice prevents Santosh taking water from the river. They all together warn Santosh pujari, “But you’r not going to touch this water.”¹⁹ They also warn that the outside labourers will not be permitted to enter for the construction of dam. They say, “We won’t let you bring labourers from outside. We’ll harvest your paddy. We’ll take daily wages and we’ll have a snack.”²⁰ It suggests that it was a declaration of the final collapse of the authority of Santosh pujari.

But, here, Santosh pujari, in order to subside his rage tries to pour poison in the mind of SDO that the demand of water by the untouchables is more dangerous than the call of Naxalite Movement. He also puts the charges on Dhura for his involvement with the Naxalite Movement. This allegation of Santosh was only to suppress the protest of the vulnerable people who are against the old mechanism of the society. Here, Mahasweta Devi acknowledges that the people who are at the ‘centre’ have their own insecurities therefore; they try to suppress the voice of the people who are at the ‘margin’ to retain their authority on them. This insecurity is not only with pujari but also with SDO.

In the last scene of the play ‘Water’, the idea of demolishing the dam with the imposition of the authority of the police is horrible. A policeman brings down a crushing blow with his rifle on Jiten’s head. Maghai comes with bleeding chest as well and loses his eyesight in this attack. But, here, Maghai with seventeen others followers takes his revenge from the people of the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

oppressive system of the society after sacrificing his life and being carried his body through the rushing and flowing water of river 'Charsha' from which he was denied to take water because of being a part of vulnerable caste. Here, divine justice comes only then, when he opposes and protests against the social injustice.

Thus, in the end of the play, Mahasweta Devi shows that Maghai who belongs to the community of dalits and untouchables represents the voice of protest against the social injustice and tries to reconstruct the lost identity and right of the vulnerable castes. Thus, with her radical and humanitarian vision, Mahasweta Devi uses literature to represent the protest of vulnerable castes against their vulnerability and takes efforts to bring them in the main-stream of life.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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