

PEN AS SWORD: A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S THE BOOK OF THE HUNTER AND "PTERODACTYL, PURAN SAHAY AND PIRTHA"

S. Krishna

Research Scholar, Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

The pen is constantly representative of a writer and what spills out of the pen is awriters expression. A writer is competent of creating a better understanding of the society through his writings and strongly believes in the power of the pen to convey ideas and to evoke emotions. Interestingly, when art and activism combine social change is born. A text thus provides myriads of opportunities for the writer to persuade the reader to take action. The power of the pen has changed histories. Innumerable social revolutions were a byproduct of the writings of a host of speakers and writers. A writer and activist with such a faith is Mahasweta Devi for whom the pen is synonymous with the sword. The indomitable hope, in the power of the pen to persuade readers and to make a better India for a better tomorrow, makes Mahasweta a true writer. Her artifacts are a disclosure of various injustices meted out to a large section of under Priviledged communities, like the tribes. Among these, she holds the tribals most close to her heart. Her narratives, anchored in history, bring to light the eclipsed lives of millions of tribes of India whose Human Rights are amputated.

When one thinks of the word "tribal" the usual obsessions are that of uncouth nomadic people, in dark lushy jungles, wearing leafy attires and speaking hullabaloo language. A tribal, to many, sounds most exotic, completely alienated from the mainstream in all aspects. Stumbling rarely in to their world, through a book or a newspaper they appear and disappear like a bubble in our lives. Nature means every thing to them. These are some of the scanty ideas a mainstream person has about the tribals.

The ouvre of Mahasweta's writing attempts to shatter this myth about the tribals and discloses their true identity, values and beliefs. This paper, Pen as a Sword: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's The Book of the Hunter (An abbreviation BOH is used for quotations) and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha"(An abbreviation PPP is used for quotations), aims to present the activist dimensions of Mahasweta, who battles the odds with her mighty pen for the cause of the tribals. There are two thrust areas in this paper. One, it focuses on how the wirter debunks the myth about the tribals and reveals their authentic life. Two, in what way, the mainstream / class elite is responsible, to take action, in order to save a race that is crumbling.

Set in 16th century Bengal, the novel, The Book of the Hunter, reads like an epic. Moving backward and forward in time and space, the past in the novel incessantly pervades the present. Through this novel, Mahasweta explores the cultural values and identity of the shabars, the hunter tribes. This she ventured in order to recapture the lost identity of the

shabars who were branded as “criminals” by the, British. The novel revolves round the life of two couples, the brahmin Mukunda and Jagadeshwari, and the tribals, Kalya and Phuli, thereby juxtaposing two cultures in terms of habits, customs and beliefs.

The novel portrays the brahmin’s life as more orthodox, steadfast in adhering to customs and conventions. With elaborate purification rituals of the self and that of the household, innumerable poojas are performed in a brahmin household. Ceremonies and exhaustive cooking are indispensable part of a brahmin life. Chillingly contrasting is the life of tribals that is unpretentious and raw with emotions. With half naked clothing of deer and moose hides and with half filled tummies of frugal meals they are happy and content in the forest. Mahasweta also sensitizes the mainstream reader about the uniqueness of tribal culture with regard to equality between man and woman, and treatment of love, marriage, and widow marriage. She highlights on how a race that is primitive in the eyes of the mainstream is more progressive and civilized than the mainstream. By weaving story within the story of King Meghban and Queen Phulloro, she traces the heritage and glorious ancestry of the tribal life that was once prosperous.

Advancement of town that leads to tribal eviction is another important theme dealt with, in the novel. A shabar is where a jungle is. The relationship between a tribal and the forest is symbiotic. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. Advantageous since the tribal find their identity in it. Disadvantageous because this is not feasible in the present day as large number of forests are uprooted for government projects and the tribals are unable to mix with the mainstream.

Through the character of Kalya, Mahasweta symbolically urges the need for the tribals to get in to the mainstream in order to survive. Kalya in the novel is a true tribe, an escapist, who shuns away from reality and longs to get back “To that sylvan identity of long - ago shabars, when towns did n’t exist?” (BOH, 106). Phuli is more practical. As Tejota remarks these are “inescapable times” and “it would n’t do for the Phulis of the world to be like the Tejotas”(BOH,106). Mahasweta artfully brings out the message towards the end. Kalya represents any tribal who goes in search of his lost “sylvan identity”. The ancient old elephant is very much symbolic of the tribal identity. Kalya’s search for the elephant is the real search for his primitive identity, both of which is fatal.

The short story “Pterodactyl’ Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, is again a plunge in to the tribal world of India. By its naked truths and haunting memories, the story stirs the reader out of the comfort zone. Being a magnum opus for the tribals spread all over India, it illuminates their torments and woes. With an unusual mix of factual datas, legends, history and myth, Mahasweta sweeps the mainstream reader in to the tribal world of India. The story, is about Puran Sahay, a journalist who visits pirtha in order to get a sensational news about the presence of an extinct species called “Pterodactyl”. This is the fulcrum around which the action of the novel takes place. The short story impels two major concerns. It kindles our understanding of the true state of the tribals and thereby highlights that the

main reason for tribal degeneration is not in the inadequacy of laws but in our failure to follow the existing ones. It awakens our conscience towards action.

Pirtha as presented in the story is a place of perennial starvation. The short story presents how years of starvation among the tribals leads to impotence, and fewer children are born to them. Devoid of basic facilities their lives are miserable. Agricultural lands being in the hands of the upper caste and legal aid cells and land reform acts being a hoax they are put in tender hooks. The short story exposes political decadence at its height. It unmasks how tribal development funds are looted, honest officials are transferred and tribal ministers are muted by political clout. These are the stunning and indigestible truths of independent, progressive India, revealed in the short story. Puran's final report debunks the myth about tribal welfare projects. He sarcastically concludes the report thus: "The truth and the lies are the same"(PPP,193). That is the tribal receiver gets nothing. Adding more fuel to the fire, the mainstream even snatched away their only source, the forest, which otherwise would provide the basic needs for them. This is an atrocity on the part of the mainstream who violates the rights of the tribals continuously. The tribals eventually are pushed in to variants exploitative mechanics, like the bonded labour system, contract labour system, prostitution, child labour and so on.

"Human rights" is defined as "those minimal rights which every individual must have against the state or other public authority by virtue of his being a member of the human family, irrespective of any other consideration". (Durga Das Basu,8). But what is theirs (tribals) by right? Nothing. Puran and Bikhia in the novel represent two different worlds, that would never converge. Mahasweta rightly says, "For a few thousand years, we have n't loved them, respected them where is the time now"(PPP,197). Again what Harisharan the BDO says is true, "I can't turn the clock by five hundred years" (PPP 120). But despite these barriers the only remedy is "a tremendous, excruciating explosive love" that Mahasweta suggests for the tribals. Puran true to his name, is ready to fulfill their dreams, not as the superior, progressive, rational and civil man, capsuled in colonial framework, but as a true human extending his love for the other.

What is common to these two works, *The Book of the Hunter* and "Pterodactyl Puran Sahay and Pirtha" is, both of them deal with tribal life and experience and convey a strong message for the mainstream. As Mahasweta made it clear in the Inaugural Address of Jaipur Literary Fest:

"For any culture, so old and ancient as ours, who have survived over time and in time, there can only be one basis - humans to accept each other's right to human".

Mahasweta deliberately makes Mukumdaram and Puran Sahay, the class elites/the mainstream to write for the tribals, in these two works, because she strongly believes that, "the pen can make it all happen!" (BOH,133).

References

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