

Trial and Tribulations Faced by Marginals: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Seeds"

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi craves to explore something challenging and new and never accepts the existing ideals. The major part of her creative writing is characterized by an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdogs. Activism is central to Mahasweta Devi's understanding of the role that a writer has in society. Through her short story "Seed", she exposes the negligence on the part of the government and the deprivation and the exploitation of the poor peasants and labourers. She is dissatisfied with the situation of the working class and shows anger towards the exploitation, cruelty and oppression of the landlords who belong to upper class.

Mahasweta Devi has been a great social activist who has always given voice for the tribal and weaker people. Her literary works clearly shows her concern for the downtrodden who are deprived by the powerful and dominant people of their basic rights. Her works do not glorify the plight of the underprivileged but they certainly show their life entrenched in hardships and present their mental strength to resist any sort of oppressions.

Devi's such works expose the negligence on the part of the government and the deprivation and the exploitation of the poor peasants and labourers. She is dissatisfied with the situation of the working class and shows anger towards the exploitation, cruelty and oppression of the landlords who belong to upper class. She is a writer with a social cause and her works are a caustic comment on the changing social-political scenario after independence where there are a large number of cases of oppressions. She has raised voice for the ordinary man and woman especially of backward and weaker section. She has mixed her activism with her art and she presents her own experiences with such people in her works.

Mahasweta Devi is a compulsive social activist and her works becomes an instrument to fight against exploitation and oppression. Her fiction is firmly rooted to the earth and is based on the ground reality instead of fantasy and pastoral romance. She has often wrote about the brutal oppression of the tribal, untouchable and weaker people by the high, dominant and authoritarian upper class moneylenders, landlords and corrupt government officials.

The first condition of her activism is that she does not take a superficial view of the reality and authenticity of fiction. Her main aim is to expose the strangle holding of feudal system over land and poor and weaker people. That is why; she has not glorified a single sequence or presented any sort of falsehood. She has simply shown the people living under oppression and their plight.

She portrayed sympathetically the pain and exploitation in the life of the downtrodden people. She speaks about it in an interview with GayatriChakravortySpivak when she tells:

The tribal and the mainstream have always been parallel.... The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel.... They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities.....they are denied everything..... That is why I started writing

about the tribal movements and the tribal world..... I repay them their honour. (Breast Stories 265)

"Seeds" is the third story in Mahasweta Devi's collection *Bitter Soil*. Being a social activist, she presented this story as a hard hitting voice against the torment of peasants by powerful and upper-class people. In this story, the powerful or dominant caste is represented by Lachhman who is the local headman of the village and a ruthless tyrant. He has a strong control on all the local resources and exploits it. Anyone who raises voice against him is killed brutally.

Mahasweta Devi through this fiction gives voice to the working class and makes an attempt to raise consciousness about the reality of discriminatory Indian social set up that still exists in the age of progress and justice. Her social activism as she confirms is the controlling force of all her literary works. She declares in this connection:

It is not new for my literature to spring from a fight for the rights of these oppressed and downtrodden people. The tribal revolt against the British at the turn of the century formed the backbone of AranyerAdhikar, which the SahityaAkademi had singled out for their awards. My social activism is the driving force of all my literary activities, be it literature... which brought me into the good books of Jyanpeeth...Perhaps their stories also impart a narrative immediacy to my language. ("Badge of all Their Tribes")

"Seeds" is the story where she exposes the intention behind the willing donation of the land by the upper caste zamindars to the people having no land after the independence. They are clever enough that they want to get rid of the useless and barren lands. But the poor peasants are not unaware of the intrigues opted by the zamindars:

There is a proverb which says that what you pick up free is worth fourteen annas. The land was free but there was not even fourteen paisa profit from it. The land belongs to above mentioned Lachhman Singh. Quite years ago, Sarvodaya activists go from door to door to every landlord in this area..... This gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be got rid of.

The recipients are bought over. One's position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all, like a rossogolla after a meal, there is the added satisfaction of knowing one is compassionate. (Bitter Soil 25)

Dulan is the protagonist of this story who's fully aware of these strategies of the landlords. In order to survive, he makes efforts and seeks the way to get benefit from the infertile and barren land. He then gets the information about government's scheme where the latter will bear all the cost of activities of farming, seeds etc. Devi here explains the alternative plan adopted by Dulan:

But the drive for survival prompts him to exploit situations by using his natural guile rather than force. He fools his powerful adversaries not by strength, but by wit and cunningness, and all the stratagems of survival are at his fingertips. (Bitter Soil 28).

Dulan thanks Lachhman as he gets land from him. He mentions it as "such a fertile piece of land" but at the same time he finds himself unable to farm or use it:

Ahaha such a good piece of land! I have got it but I can't use it.

–Why? The BD office will give you everything. I'm a low caste.

–of course, you are. It's because you don't remember this that you get kicked around. Sure, you're a low caste! But how can they refuse to help someone I'm giving land to? (Bitter Soil 28 - 29)

Dulan makes a request to Lachhman Singh who strongly appeals to BDO to provide Dulan some money to buy plough, bullocks, seeds and fertilizers. His appeals work and Dulan gets aid from the government. Dulan continues to use this strategy to take money from the government in the name of plough and bullock:

Every alternate year. Every time he takes the money, he says, the bullock died, hujoor. He takes the money, collects the fertilizer and sells it at Tohri. Hoists the sack of seeds onto his shoulder and brings it home (Bitter Soil 29-30).

In this story, Devi gives voice to those whose fundamental rights in terms of food, clothes and shelter have been forfeited. Dulan decides to eat these seeds after boiling them. His wife makes some inquiry about these things and he replies:

Our hunger. Can hunger be measured? The Land of one's stomach keeps increasing! You want me to farm that barren strip of land? Are you crazy? –What'll you do, then? –Boil it, grind it, we'll eat it. (Bitter Soil 30)

These "Seeds" are used by Dulan's wife in order to make only one-time meal and she says that it is the sweetest thing she has ever eaten in life. It shows the poor and pity condition of such poor peasants. Dulan's strategy to take money from government is only to provide his family some food:

She proudly told everyone in the village about this tasty food. Can other married woman in the village boast of how brainy her man is, of how cunningly he fools the gorment, so that his family can eat rice made from paddy seeds? (Bitter Soil 30)

Mahasweta Devi does not like to portray poverty or protest in a romantic manner. Being a social activist, she knows very well the age-old social set up of Indian society especially the structure of powerful persons. She also raises another issue of labourers who work on daily basis and whose conditions were not same as the present situations. The labourers of the village demand their daily wages into twenty-five paise because the labourers of the nearby villages are getting eight annas per day. Their demands get suppressed and they are compelled to work in the fields of Lachhman Singh for four annans per day only. Such deprived and exploited persons are aware of the fact that they have to go long way for it and also know that they have to fight in many ways and on different settings:

The gorment belongs to Lachman Singh...If such a gorment is fleeced by someone who happens to be a DulanGanju, then the villagers are bound to be full of appreciation (Bitter Soil 30).

The other concern portrayed by the writer is to fight for one's rights through the character of Dushad who belongs to Tamidih. One day, he arrives in the village where he works as a labour in the fields of Lachhman. He starts disputing with the landlord and is sent to jail. This very incident in the story arises the consciousness and realization. They should make at least some efforts to get decent wages as per government rule instead of only waiting for justice

Let's organize ourselves in advance. Talk things over with him. Ask the police to be present during harvesting. Our demands are very few. We're harijans and adivasis. We won't get good wages in these parts. We'll fight for eight annas. Women-men-children, eight annas for everyone. He's giving four annas. This will be our "twenty-five paise battle" for an additional four annas. (Bitter Soil 32)

At the same time, the backward people and the tribals are aware of the fact that rich and powerful people are taking advantage of their positions and they can raise voice against them:

Make no mistake. The entire sarkar will help Lachman. He can open fire and they won't notice. But you raise a stick and they'll catch you. (Bitter Soil 33)

The rebellion of Karan Dushad works and the harvesting and collecting the corn resolves without any dispute or one can say peacefully. It is because of him that each labourer gets eight annas per day for their wages: *Karan Dushad became a hero. A fairy tale comes true* (Bitter Soil 33).

The story also shows the dominant nature of the powerful landlords and their unacceptability to the rise of weaker people. That's what is shown by the Lachhman Singh after this event. He has already made a plan to show his supremacy:

As evening draws to dusk, in the radiance of the setting sun, Lachhman Singh accompanied by his Rajput caste brothers, attacks the Dushad quarters in Tamadiah. Fire rages, people burn, huts collapse. (Bitter Soil 33)

Devi presents the brutality of the powerful people in the story when Dulan was compelled to bury Karan and his brother Bulaki in the field. He is also forced to guard the field. That is why Dulan always sleeps on the "machaan" built in the middle of the field despite of the fact that this barren land grows nothing. Lachhman knows well that nobody in the village will go against him. Any person will not become a witness to what he

or she has seen: "They have read the warning in Lachhman's sharp, silent gaze. He who opens his mouth will die. This has happened before. Will happen again." (Bitter Soil 35)

It's the characteristic of Devi's fiction that she does not exaggerate the violence, but she is quite familiar with the mindset of the oppressed people. She explores here that every human has its own limitation to bear the oppression, victimization and the aftermath violence. She has put the under mentioned comment which is the voice and sentiment of not only that of Dulan, Dhatua but also of the countless depressed people:

Once in a while it is necessary to rend the sky with leaping flames and the screams of the dying, just to remind the harijans and untouchables that government laws, appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing. Rajputs remain Rajputs, Brahmins remain Brahmins and Dushad-Chamar-Ganju-Dhobi remain lower than Brahmin - Kayasth- Rajput- Bhumihar- Kurmi. The tribal too are deeply aware of the uphill struggle, and yet know that a battle can be fought on many fronts and in many ways. (Bitter Soil 35)

Devi always lays emphasis during the development of her story that all her protagonists become aware of the oppression and victimization. Everyone is compelled to forget Karan Dushad and Bulaki who are missing from the village. The consequence of this event goes in favour of Lachhman who becomes even more powerful. The exploited and suppressed people realize that they are not safe. They have no place to go and hide. This is the realization for them that hiding and denial will not work any longer here. The writer again exposes the case of brutal oppression during the harvesting where Lachhman Singh fires shots on the labourers working in his fields and many of them are killed: *Four horses carrying four corpses. This time Lachhman's men help Dulan. Deep, deep pits are needed. The land is soaked with monsoon rain and autumn dew. Four corpses piled one on the other. The burden within Dulan grows even heavier (Bitter Soil 42)*

Devi again brings out the mental condition of an oppressed person as Dulan would never be able to reveal this secret to anyone. When he reaches home, he listens his son Dhatua's song where he asks about the Karan Dushad and his peaceful brother Bulaki. Dulan now gets scared and disturbed and shows concern about his son by thinking what will happen if the landlord hears this song. He alarms his son: *Dulan broke into deep sobs. He said- forget that song. Or you'll also get lost in police files... His heart is filled with unnamed fear for his son Dhatua... (Bitter Soil 43-44)*

Lachhman Singh takes the service of Amarnath Mishra in order to ensure the harvesting goes smoothly when there comes drought, famine, flood and crop destruction. The harvesting activity begins without taking the help of labourers from outside. Dulan's son Dhatua and other labourers do this work but the trouble starts when Amarnath and his men start demanding their share from the wages. The villagers lead by Dhatua protest against it and Lachhman Singh keeps himself away from this matter as he does not want to offend Dulan. But at the same time Dhatua is not willing to yield to him:

Dulan's son Dhatua resists the most. That's why Lachhman Singh doesn't want to get involved. The only way he knows of dealing with the untouchable is a bullet from his gun. This is one person he doesn't want to shoot. Dulan is too useful for him. (Bitter Soil 44-45)

Amarnath demands his share of one sikka per day and this amount should be given to him and his men. However, Dhatua and his fellow labourers are not in a mood to accept this suggestion. They protest:

No hujoor! We won't. Dhatua protests. Lachhman sighs. Once again, he will have to work to pattern. Once again he will have to pick up his gun...As the light fades into evening, Lachhman gives his men the necessary actions- If threats do the trick, don't open fire. Lachhman's men ride their horses through the ripe paddy... They raise their guns. This side storms into the fields at amazing speed... First verbal missiles speed back and forth. Then the inevitable bullets fly. Lots of them... Then the sharp scythes and iron choppers slash the horse's hooves, keep slashing. The horses and their riders thunder on... (Bitter Soil 46-48)

All family of Dulan waits long for Dhatua but he does not come yet. The next day, Lachhman Singh himself tells him:

Sorry, Dulan, I forbade them, but still these beasts opened a fire....

- Dhatua? -Buried....

Yes. But don't open your mouth, Dulan. Or else your wife, your son, son's wife, grandson, no one will be spared. Take, I'll give you money, lots of money. Your son called the police.... But remember I am sparing Latua only because he's your son. I haven't fired a single bullet today. I could have felled Dhatua with a single shot. But I didn't. (Bitter Soil 49-50)

Devi explains that when the dominance of the powerful landlords receive a threat, the threat of violence becomes clear. In such situations, the weaker section can no longer be suppressed and the constant oppression invokes them to raise their voice. Such situation arises when the villagers refuse to work and Lachhman is not able to get labour immediately. Devi exposes here the brutal and tyrant face of landlords as Lachhman Singh orders his men to threaten villagers and compel them to work. If they do not show their willingness, they should be taught a lesson:

Lachhman gives instructions--If threats do the trick, don't open fire. Lachhman's men ride their horses through the paddy. . . First, verbal missiles speed back and forth. Then the inevitable bullets fly. Lots of them ...in the field someone gargles blood deep in his throat. A familiar sound. Then, sharp scythes and iron choppers slash the horses' hooves, keep slashing. The horses and their riders thunder on. The others steal out and fire. Latua and Param run off towards Tohri. (Bitter Soil 51-52)

Dulan pondered over this matter repeatedly and at last, he decides to turn mad. He uproots the Alao and Putush from his land because he wants to sow seeds in his land. Lachhman

gets this information and he becomes very angry with Dulan and enters in his fields. At this moment of the story, Devi shows the intensity of pain seething with anger of Dulan who exploded it by doing extreme type of violence. As a consequence of it, he kills Lachhman Singh -the village headman with a rock. This is the apt example of the violence and brutality that explains the kind of sentiments of the tribal and weaker people when they crossed the limitation to bear the oppression:

Dulan below, Lachman on horseback. All at once. Dulan grabbed Lachman's foot and pulled hard. Lachman fell. His gun was hurled away. The gun in Dulan's hand. Before Lachman could gather his wits, the butt of the gun slammed into his head. Lachman screamed. Dulan smashed the butt into his collar bone.... He began to smash in Lachman's head with a rock.... Dulan is not used to killing, a rock has no value, this death is the result of years of intense mental turmoil. He continued to smash Lachman's head. (Bitter Soil 54)

Dulan repeats the burial scene after killing Lachhman Singh. He buries him under a heap of stones in the same manner as the village headman has asked Dulan to bury Karan and his brother Bulaki. It is the result of the years of silence that should not be considered as equal to accepting and condoning the suppression of rights: "Laughter begins to well up inside him. So, Malik protector, you're like the disgusting Oraon-Munda? Buried under stones? A stony grave?" (Bitter Soil 54)

Devi here brings out the mentality of the powerful people that weak people like Dulan can never do any violent activity. For many days, search for Lachhman Singh goes on but there is no one who can even suspect that Dulan can do such a thing: "At no stage do suspicions centered on Dulan. It is natural not to suspect him. It is impossible to imagine Dulan killing Lachman, whatever the circumstances" (Bitter Soil 55).

In the end, Dulan feels contented and gives away his paddy to the peasants in a very touching and emotional spirit. It is something sacred and poignant paid for the sacrifices of the village labourers including his son:

*My paddy is your seed. Take it.
You're giving it away?
Yes, take it, reap it. There's a long story behind this.
Did you use fertilizer?*

Yes I did, very precious fertilizer. Dulan's voice disappears like the string of a served kite losing itself in the sky. Then, clearing his throat he says, You harvest it. Give me some, as well. I'll sow it again and again. There is in the ripe green paddy nourished on your flesh and bones! Because you will be seed. To be a seed is to stay alive. Dhatua – Dulan's voice trembles as he says the name. Dhatua, I've turned you all into seed. (Bitter Soil 56)

Duhan has killed a brutal landlord and takes the revenge of the death of his son and other innocent labourers and villagers. This way opted by him is the final solution by such oppressed people. G.N. Devy says in this context:

In Mahasweta Devi's fiction.... all her characters, generally coming from rural

backgrounds, are farm workers, tribal poor workers, tribal, poor women and subalterns. They face exploitation at the hands of the landlords, Government officials, policemen, moneylenders. Almost invariably her protagonists turn violent towards the end of her stories. There is the progressive kind of violence.

By killing Lachhman Singh, Duhan manages to save his village from the oppression of a tyrant and brutal landlord. The death of his fellow workers does not go in vain. He keeps them alive by putting the seeds in his fields and turns their corpses into paddy. The needed nourishment for the paddy is given by the sacrifices of the villagers and hence Dulan distributes the entire paddy among villagers and feels inner relief:

Dulan returns to his land. His heart is strangely, wonderfully light today.... Karan, Asrafi, Mohar, Bulaki, Mahuban, Paras and Dhatua-what an amazing joy there is in the ripe green paddy nourished on your flesh and bones! Because you will be seed. To be a seed is to stay alive...Dulan climbs up to the machaan. A tune in his heart. Stubbornly disobedient. Returning time and again. Dhatua made up this song. Dhatua-- Dulan's voice trembles as he says this name. Dhatua, I've turned you all into seed.

As a social activist, Mahasweta Devi illustrates in this story the birth of a consciousness which is emerged as the part of a cycle of oppression, awareness and sacrifice. She presents a deep humanism and a deep-rooted concern for sufferings, exploitations and oppressions which has built philosophy of her life. This story explains a reversion of the civilized rules when they get continuous suppression and for them violence becomes the only way out.

The story exposed the manipulation of political power by the village headman even in murdering the poor peasants and labourers. It continues until, Dulan Ganju, the protagonist and a poor peasant of the village, takes revenge in the end by hitting his head with a stone. He buries him in the same way as he has been asked to do by the headman. It is the natural outcome of the years of silence which cannot be taken as acceptance and deprivation of rights.

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