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Exploitation of Subaltern Women – an Analysis of Mahaswetha Devi’s Short Story, *Shanichari*

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Abstract:

The present paper is about the exploitation of subaltern women physically, sexually, socially and economically by the mainstream society. This is exposed through the story, Shanichari, written by Mahaswetha Devi. Mahaswetha Devi, the noted writer-activist of Bengal, uses her pen to raise awareness against social injustice, discrimination and poverty, especially against tribal and indigenous people in India. Shanichari, one of the short stories in the Outcast is an example of eclipsed system of wrenching women within patriarchy, caste, impoverishment, and local politics; these strictures exploiting a female body in terms of sexuality and production. The protagonist Shanichari in the story is represented as ‘the other’ in the discourse of being tribal, woman and peasant, a subject of non-hegemonic group. Like Shanichari, most of the writings of Mahaswetha Devi bring to the fore the complexities of caste, tribe, class and gender that exist in India today.

Keywords: Subaltern, exploitation, tribal women, complexities, class and gender, mainstream society

Mahaswetha Devi, an extraordinary mix of an activist and a writer of Bengal, uses her pen to raise awareness against social injustice, discrimination and poverty, especially against tribal and indigenous people in India. As a leading Bengali fiction writer and an eminent social activist, she champions the cause of the 25 million tribal people in India, who belong to approximately 150 different tribes. Her writings reflect the ugliness, squalor and misery in the lives of the tribal people and indict Indian society for the indignity it heaps on its most oppressed constituents, the Dalits. Since 1980 Mahaswetha Devi has been actively associated with many grassroots level social movements around the question of bonded labour, persisting feudalism in rural polity, state negligence, and forceful acquisition of agricultural land.

Mahaswetha Devi’s disenchantment with middle class morality occurred at the same time in her life as her active political commitment that led her to travel deep into the tribal hinterland of Bihar and West Bengal to understand the real conditions of tribal existence. During this period Mahaswetha Devi withdrew from her literary pursuits and her teaching, and produced prolific volumes of interventionist journalism instead. This phase reached a culmination in her founding the radical working-class periodical *Bortika* in which she took editorial charge of representing marginal writing that included rural peasants, factory workers and tribals. As editor of the journal *Bortika*, Mahaswetha Devi has penned several stories that are often the product of her meticulous research as a journalist. This period also coincided with her growing familiarity and fondness for tribals in areas like Palamau, Murshidabad, Medinipur and Purulia. Since then, Mahaswetha Devi has been campaigning for tribal mobilization, focusing on issues like abolishment of bonded labour, industrial exploitation, education and the planning and implementation of development schemes.

Most of Mahaswetha Devi’s works portray women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste played at various levels of social relationships. The present paper is an analysis of Mahaswetha Devi’s short story, *Shanichari* and the aim of the paper is to emphasize the role of the society – both mainstream and marginal, as culprits in exploiting the very existence of tribal women. The exploitation of subaltern women physically, sexually, socially and economically by the mainstream society is exposed in the story. From time immemorial, women’s identity has sought to be suppressed to in different ways by the forces of patriarchal society. *Shanichari*, one of the short stories in the *Outcast* is an example of eclipsed system of wrenching women within patriarchy, caste, impoverishment, and local politics; these strictures exploiting a female body in terms of sexuality and production. The protagonist Shanichari is represented as ‘the other’ in the discourse of being tribal, woman and peasant, a subject of non-hegemonic group. Like *Shanichari*, most of the writings of Mahaswetha Devi bring to the fore the complexities of caste, tribe, class and gender that exist in India today.

Similar tales of exploitation and selling off women and girls from the villages to the rich contractors in the cities is a common theme that runs through many other stories. For the uncultivated, uneducated, rustic village folks, the city offers a glimpse of an unknown world, where dreams become reality. It provides an opportunity to escape from the clutches of poverty, debt and the constant threat of becoming the object of the landlords' attention.

The story begins with a teen age girl of twelve named Shanichari, a tribal from Oraon Village, going to a place called *haat* with her grandmother in a train compartment. The commencing of the narration portrays the subaltern position of these people, "sitting on the floor of the compartment, chugging along, having a good time picking the lice from each other's hair" (*Outcast* 35).

The story goes ahead with other characters like Hiralal, a blind singer who warns out Shanichari from the fangs of Gohuman Bibi, a pimp. Sanichari becomes aware of the sex racket that exists, and resists the advances of Gohuman Bibi, the kingpin of this entire trade who promises that the girls will not have to worry about boarding, lodging, clothing as "the *malik* will take care of everything" (*Outcast* 40) – all they have to do is work as "rejas", which means labourers in the brick kilns of the city. Sanichari knows that the reality is different.

Yet, in due course of time, Shanichari too has no choice but to subscribe to the Inevitable. Shanichari voluntarily gives herself up to Gohuman's fangs as it seems to be the only route of escape. In her village that year comes draught, mean no harvest. Even the roots and tubers have dried out. This is the apt time for Gohuman Bibi to come to the village and entice the village girls. It is the same time when the Adi Jati Raksha Morcha Movement swept all across the country. The Raksha Morcha under the leadership of Parija Marmu was fighting for the rights of the adivasis. In village there were no mutiny except a big meeting and many joined the Morcha with their bows and arrows.

Mahasweta Devi gives the realistic picture of the atrocities of the military and the police force. The BMP took the young girls into the forest and raped them brutally. The girls are forced to survive in the forest as they have no clothes to wear. Their clothes are all burnt down along with their huts. Now this is helplessly a question of survival and it is at this time that Gohuman Bibi appears like a veritable goddess.

Though Mahasweta Devi exposes the brutalities of the government and military, her major concern is towards the innocent girls of the village. These innocent girls are taken away to Kolkata by Gohuman because they needed clothes and food to survive. The story is not only to show girls' harrowing troubles but the helplessness of a vulnerable society where they become a prey, and victimized by paramilitary forces.

It is with the promise of becoming a part of a world where the girls can wear nice clothes and make pots of money that they are brought to Kolkata and then forced into prostitution and physical exploitation. That is how Shanichari too come along with the girls to the city. Rendered homeless and naked after the confrontation between the police and the tribal in the village, this remains her only choice as her fiancée Chand Tirkey is shot dead by the police. Completely aware of her fate, shanichari voluntarily gives herself up to Gohuman's fangs. However even she does not realize the inhumanity of the situation till she actually reaches the city. Shanichari is sold in a brick kiln at Barasat in West Bengal. The girls are sold as workers in brick kilns and much worst subjected to sexual exploitation by the owner and other men. Their voices cannot reverberate in brick kiln. Perhaps nobody can expect to know the unassailable fate of these Ho- Oraon -Munda- Santhal tribal girls. The girls are forced to live in pigsties; there is one single tube well for three hundred girls and no route for escape. Her revolt against such degrading conditions lands Shanichari the role as the mistress of the owner, Rahmat. In a way, her position is privileged. For her companions, the situation was the worst possible. After working all day, and paid only fifteen rupees per week, the nights are worse:

"At the end of the day, when you're too fired to keep your eyes open, the head *mastaan* will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to them, tomorrow the driver, the day after the *munshi*" (52). Festival days are much worse. The girls are forced to drink liquor till they pass out and are repeatedly gang raped.

Sanichari remains 'privileged' till the time she gets pregnant, when she is replaced. Ultimately, when Sanichari returns home, she is not accepted in the village. In spite of repentance feasts and rites, both she and her son are outcasts. The worst part is, even her son will never be able to marry into the village, as the Khawasin custom demands that if one parent of the child is a non-tribal, she or he has to get married to a child of similar parentage. However, the strength of Shanichari lies in her refusal to give in to the circumstances. She realizes it is not individuals but society that is to blame for the situation that she and many others like her find themselves in. Shanichari's dramatic depiction of the real culprits brings this to the fore:

"Everything around you, ev-e-r-y-thing. Shanichari stretched out her arms to include the world around her, standing stock still (56).

Mahasweta Devi ends her story on a note mixed with hope and despair. Hope lies in Shanichari's resolve to establish her identity and keep fighting against all the odds, in which there is a message for other women. Hope also lies in characters like Chand Tirkey's elder brother, who asks the community to reconsider the excommunication of Shanichari by questioning if it was right to throw out the woman from the village. Yet, no one else in the community is willing to endorse this point of view. Till the time society refuses to change, tragedies like Shanichari's will continue to happen. Mahasweta Devi points her finger at the society, both mainstream and marginalized, for the pathetic situation of the village girls. The government is just a mouthpiece of the upper class society. The BMP and the military are bold enough to rape the innocent girls brutally. Their huts are burnt and their livelihood is snatched away. This indicates clearly that even after independence, Indian government has not recognized the tribal people as its citizens. Neither the marginalized have anyone to turn to, nor there is any law for their protection.

It is at this juncture that writers like Mahasweta Devi devote their life to protest against the atrocities against the marginalized people. Most of Mahasweta's works narrate the stories of tribal women as victims of such exploitative practices in post-independence India. Her journalistic articles highlight the statistical details of the working conditions of tribals, dalits and other poor women who work as migrant and bonded labourers in agriculture and industry in the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab. (*Dust on the Road* 1-24, 87-96) She has narrated the condition of the tribal women who are caught in this vicious cycle of exploitation and violence in many short stories. As in all her stories, Mahasweta inserts the tribal's discourse into the narrative, in an effort to foreground the tribal's perspective.

Mahasweta Devi hints at the continuity of the cycle of the dehumanizing exploitation that is likely to continue in the name of progress and development, with the tribals, especially tribal women, at the receiving end. Caught in the cross-currents of the hegemonic male discourses of patriarchy, both within their own community and others, the tribal woman is thus repeatedly pushed into a position of powerlessness and becomes the object of violent sexual harassment, in addition to the already existing exploitation faced in the name of class and tribe. The tribal woman is made an outcast when she gets pregnant with an upper class man's child. The paradox lies in the fact that the tribal community is powerless to avoid any such incidents. They are in capable of protecting their women from the lustful attacks of the mainstream men. Thus the victim is punished for the crime by the same society. And thus once again Mahasweta Devi points her finger at society.

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