

THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF MAHASWETA DEVI: A RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE READERS

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We do not know it, it was like a continent. We did not try to know it. It is same everywhere. (...) Each tribe is like a continent. But we never tried to know them. Never tried to respect them. This is true to every tribal. And we destroyed them. (Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, xv)

The Indian tribal population, according to Mahasweta Devi, is a “continent” that is yet unmapped, a space yet unknown, unexplored and forgotten by the mainstream authority. Yet this space has quite often invaded the fictive imagination of literary writers. With the advent of the postcolonial perspective in the global academia, numerous theorists have tried to incorporate and highlight the marginalised sections within the principle discussions on Nation. For instance, Fredric Jameson has suggested say in his 1986 essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital” that “all Third World texts are necessary to be read as national allegories”. Benedict Anderson has proposed the idea of nation as “imagined political communities”, where the nation is considered as a socially constructed space, rather than a geographically bounded political one, where every person imagines himself to be a member of a larger community called Nation. (Anderson, 06) The cultural and textual representation of the space is analysed in Homi Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (1990). These postulations, drawn heavily from postcolonial theories, have revised the conventional notion of a bounded political space called the Nation, supplanting it with the idea of small collectives functioning parallelly, having their own set of distinctive socio-political-cultural beliefs and manner of livelihood that constitute a larger Nation. The construction of the Nation has gradually diffused under its label the simultaneous existence of several other ‘nations’. Mahasweta Devi’s literary works, both fiction and non-fiction, tend to critically negotiate with the idea of a homogenised Nation and draws our attention to the margins raising the importance of a multicultural space. Her fiction engages with the particularity of the experience of the oppressed which can be read in the broader light of the political subaltern collective. The summation of each of the experiences relayed by several characters in Devi’s fiction, if read carefully, would help in conjuring up an image of the collective Indian tribal experience, which would be helpful in answering several queries surrounding the ignored identity of the subaltern.

Mahasweta Devi, as Minoli Salgado rightly said, is “probably the most widely translated Indian writer working in an indigenous language today”. (Menozzi, 62) Her works are translated into various regional languages and of course, into English, of which Spivak’s translations stand the most significant and academic ones. With the most eminent postcolonial critic, Spivak,

engaging with Devi's work, both Devi and her texts have been aptly appropriated within the global postcolonial academia, in spite of the translator's much debated transnational approaches. Through Spivak, Devi's purpose of communicating the tribal history and their conditions to the mainstream has gained a worldwide reputation. Spivak's Marxist-feminist and deconstructionist take on several stories, mostly published in the form of lengthy, pedantic, academic essays are quite familiar critical pieces in various undergraduate courses.

Devi's stories, however, do not idealise the tribal community. Instead, she wants the intelligentsia to be familiar with such 'denotified tribes' and their plight in the face of a fast-paced globalised world. She highlights the long negated prevailing discontent within the decolonised India. She emphasizes on the two divisions the Nation was internally split into: the mainstream, privileged intellectual, and the neglected, dominated subalterns. Her narratives are, according to Alakananda Bagchi, "a disruption of traditional historiography" defeating the conventional articulation of the history of subdued subaltern voices. (Bagchi, 44) Spivak's creative interpretation has furthered Bagchi's ideas to another introspective reading of subaltern as "lingering in postcoloniality in the space of difference, *in decolonized terrain*." (Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 105) She continues to describe the space as a product of the "colonization-decolonization reversal":

Especially in a critique of metropolitan culture, the event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand between colony and decolonization as an unexamined good that operates a reversal. But the political goals of the new nation are supposedly determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interest reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, and capitalist development. Whatever the fate of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space in the new nation that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space had no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern*. Mahasweta's fiction focuses on it as the space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal. This is the space that can become, for her, a representation of decolonization *as such*. (Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 106)

According to Spivak, by virtue of the "colonization-decolonization reversal", the subalterns should have been integrated under the influence of the new colonising powers within the mainstream, where they could have effectively established a successful connection with the "culture of imperialism". But, the exclusion of this community is ever more pronounced than any sincere efforts to include them. The binary created within the decolonised land, the "space of difference" inhabited by the subalterns subtly rejects the very idea of decolonisation. Such interpretations have further aggravated complicated discussions on nationhood, colonialism, decolonialism and postcolonialism. The global academia has, thereafter, engaged with numerous such interpretations under the broader label of Postcolonial (Subaltern) Studies.

What is interesting to note is that, Devi who is known for her unfaltering, tireless activism seldom finds a place in the academic curriculum for her social activist writings, through for instance, the excerpts of her writings in *Bortika* or articles from *Economic and Political Weekly*-- periodicals where she has consistently contributed on various social and political issues. Not only is there a selection in the assortment of fictional texts in the course, but also in the choice of texts in the non-fiction genre. The syllabus is a chosen mix of novels, essays, poetries and short stories. Whereas, most of the prose works included in the course assists the student in forming certain theoretical ideas through which the postcolonial, socio-cultural condition of a particular place can be better conceived, it is to be noted that informational texts are seldom a part of the syllabi. The relative less importance of such informational texts are due to the type of the content of such texts-- which are a collection of mere facts and figures, devoid of much critical aspects which become one of the prime reasons for their seldom inclusion within the main syllabi. Such texts are, often, squeezed into the introductory/background lectures of the course. As a result, students seldom pay much importance to discuss such texts at greater length, the chief discussion being directed to the various ideas used in the other prescribed works. But, often what is neglected is the importance of these accurate facts and figures which facilitate in a better grasping of a certain condition by the student, especially with texts relating to the subaltern, the reader gets to acquaint himself to the validity of such stories. It engages with the student's understanding of a certain condition of a certain section of people of a certain time period. The necessary historical details help them in relating to the incidents that the imaginary, fictive characters try to communicate.

For a postcolonial writer like Mahasweta Devi, who fulfils the role of an activist/journalist and a literary figure with equal efficiency, it becomes further crucial for the academia to include informational texts alongside other forms of non-fiction and fiction. Devi draws the ideas for her fiction from her experiences during her active involvement with the tribal community in the Palamau district of Jharkhand. Her understanding of the grassroot level problems of these subalterns had gained a firm ground during her field work in Palamau. And in this context, if these informational texts are read in tandem with the mainstream texts, the students/ readers would gain a better, thoughtful absorption of the conditions the subalterns live within the so-called democratic Indian space. The details of the Governmental policies and various projects undertaken by numerous NGOs together with specificities like date, place and the amount disbursed for the cause impact the minds of the readers, where they realise the futile efforts undertaken by the Government just for the heck of it. The Government fudges the 'real' need of the tribal community with an apparent, fallacious show of various development schemes and policies. This highlight becomes a necessary tool for the authority to justify their concerned efforts for the marginalised, thereby misleading the mainstream audience.

Gayatri Spivak in her Preface to *Imaginary Maps* had commented on the interdependable relation shared between Devi's writing and journalism-- "her writing and her activism reflect one another, they are precisely that -- 'a folding back upon one another' -- re-flection in the root sense . . . Indeed, if one reads carefully, one may be seen as the other's *differance*". ("Translator's Preface," *Imaginary Maps*, xxi)

Radha Chakravarty reiterates Spivak's view on Devi's role. During her personal interview with Devi in Kolkata on January 25, 1997, the latter had clarified saying,

In my case, editing *Bortika*, writing columns for newspapers and journals, creative writing and activism, each sustains the other. You cannot demarcate one from the other. They are not four separate watertight compartments, but a whole. (Chakravarty, 191)

In this light, Devi's writings form an active form of protest, an integral part of her activism and for the reader the interpretation of the text can form an active participation in the protest. The inherently predominant political aspect of the act of writing, be it fiction or non-fiction is not to be neglected. Devi efficiently extends the contours of activism and writing, letting the latter feed on the former. She, through her writing abilities, echoes the classical axiom of the 'pen being mightier than the sword' and how the same can silently inspire the 'collective struggle' that Spivak mentions in the appendix of *Imaginary Maps*. The texts are as much an act of self-reflection, a movement directed inwards, as it is a movement outwards into communities that have been marginalized, absent from nationalist discourses and have been conveniently neglected. The two kinds of movement coupled together—inward and outward, and the resultant effect of the two movements which is a heightened consciousness about one's own position and beliefs can be interpreted as the "gift" of the subaltern. Perhaps, one could also argue that the texts are as much directed towards a self-introspection on the part of the reader as much to the existing subaltern conditions in the Third World. Devi acts a guardian of the tribes and enacts her responsibility towards them through her act of writing fiction and communicating the tribal condition to the mainstream world. In her interview with Spivak, she mentions the "*asthirata*" (restlessness) and "*udbeg*" (anxiety) she faces at the thought of the vanishing tribal life and the need of immediate documentation of the tribal events. (*Chotti*, xiii) It is perhaps through this documentation that she wanted to guard their vanishing culture. To echo Filippo Menozzi, "Custodianship is a question about the transmission and understanding of literature and the literary invention as field of transmission of tradition and cultures as something that is still living, rather than as an object of past." (Menozzi, 61) It is this custodianship that Devi provides through her literary works. Devi had strongly felt the need to communicate to a wider audience through other forms of writings, the fiction not being "adequate enough a medium" for her. (*Dust*, xiii) She extends out her concern through her quarterly periodical *Bortika* (1980) which according to Maitreyi Ghatak in her Introduction to Devi's *Dust on the Road* had "become a forum where small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, workers in factories, rickshaw pullers could write about their life and problems." (*Dust*, xiv) Devi had added that *Bortika* would publish contributions "based on facts, figures, observations and even surveys- only those actually relevant to an understanding of a problem that affected the people or those provided some directions for change" (*Dust*, xv) Filippo Menozzi in his book *Postcolonial Custodianship: Cultural and Literary Inheritance* writes that Mahasweta Devi's fictions are different from her non-fictions in that it is through her fictions she is able to problematize the act of writing as guardianship. Rather than literal representation of historiographical knowledge of the subaltern she impels the reader to unconditionally receive and respond to what is demanded out of her or him. According to him, "the text gives rise to the figuration of custodianship, a responsibility which depends on the ability to read the figure or guard the secret." In the story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", while Bikhia initially acts as the custodian of the secret, the secret later transmitted to Puran, is expected to act responsibly and decide how much information must be relayed to the world—what must be transmitted and what must be preserved. Devi's role as a

journalist/activist and as an author conflates in this short story where through the fictional character of Puran Sahay, who is also a journalist, she speaks her mind about the need to transmit the cipher but at the same time be cautious of unleashing chosen information that would not harm the primitivity of the tribes. This responsibility is the “ability to love” what Spivak calls “a simple name for ethical responsibility-in-singularity”. (*Imaginary*, 200) It is the responsibility to be accountable towards an equal—a custodianship which will determine solidarity with the oppressed.

Some of the novels by Devi like *Jhansir Rani* (1956), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1975), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1980) and *Sal Girar Dake* (1984) show the effective use of historical details in shaping the necessary imagination of the fiction. Through such literary enterprises Devi makes a bold step in raising awareness among her readers about the neglected section within a historical context. Such literary works not only hint at the alternative historiography implanted within a known, popular historical past but also focuses on how the fading, traditional oral narrative technique through songs, tales and myths was a chief mode for recording their past subaltern experiences. Such literary endeavours destabilise the mystified validity of the known history and redirects to the equal importance of oral narratives as legitimate sources of information. The historical novels effectively intertwine the elements of memory, facts, imagination and belief to set renewed strictures for historical enquiry. The factual details and the research involved add credence to such works which becomes appealing to the readers. Devi in her fictions/novels incorporates both the imaginary and the real characters which makes her works a skilful concoction of reality and fantasy. Spivak neatly summarises,

Those who read or write literature can claim as little of subaltern status as those who read or write history. The difference is that the subaltern as object is supposed to be imagined in one case and real in another. I am suggesting that it is a bit of both in both cases. (Menozzi, 64)

But just an informed reading might not be the only requisite in case of Devi’s works. While referring to Puran Sahay, the narrator says;

Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century’s sun is set in the Western sky, otherwise this aggressive civilization will have to pay a terrible price, look at history, the aggressive civilization has destroyed itself in the name of progress, each time.

Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran’s amazed heart discovers what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life. (*Imaginary*, 197)

This “excruciating love” demands a wholehearted engagement, a personal intervention and a complete succumbing of the self to the cause. It demands the individual to no longer remain a mute, distant spectator but an activist in the true sense of the term.

The ethical constitution of ‘we’, those who claim to read and interpret, is dependent on the act of reading. It can be restricted and restrictive, or can embrace the plurality, multiplicity and contingency of interpretation. Reading itself can be defined broadly, it not just interpreting words off a page, but helping make sense of the signifiers in our society, urging a plea for

engagement and empathy. There is a strong and deep sense of moral responsibility which comes with the act of reading, deciphering signs. The first world scholars and readers of Devi's fiction can be identified with the interventionist figures who appear in her works. The emphasis is on the academicians, theoreticians, analysts, social activists and other independent or assigned interventionist who try relentlessly to address the subaltern problems and assist them, to make the public sphere aware of their existing conditions through surveys and elaborate theories. They through their reading of Devi's works are also expected to carry forward the responsibility or the custodianship of spreading the subaltern conditions to the rest of the world. He is expected to share the burden of Devi in reaching out to the subaltern, be a part of the activism that Devi associates herself with. Reading, thus becomes an 'act of love', an important part of the act of responding and transmitting the message. The author appears keen to elicit this sense of responsibility from the readers and to encourage them participate in relaying the lost message -- offer their acts of love. While Devi's writings form an active form of protest, for the reader the interpretation of the text can form an active participation in the protest. The ability to think through his effectual reading of the texts can be seen as a starting point of his response. Perhaps, one could also argue that it is not the subaltern condition that the texts aim to reflect on, it is instead directed towards a self-introspection on the part of the reader. The awareness of the conditions of the subaltern, although universalized, triggers in the minds of the readers a sense of responsibility and this initiation of consciousness is what makes his reading successful.

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