SOCIO-ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
IN THE SELECT WORK OF MAHASWETA DEVI

A
SUMMARY SUBMITTED
TO
JIWAJI UNIVERSITY, GWALIOR
MADHYA PRADESH
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
ENGLISH
2014

SUPERVISED BY
Dr. Sonia Singh Kushwah
Department of English
K.R.G. Autonomous P.G. College
Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh

SUBMITTED BY
Deepali Bisht
SUMMARY

CHAPTER -1: Introduction

The first chapter introduces Mahasweta Devi and her work for society and literature. It discusses Mahasweta Devi as a post-colonial writer, as a social activist and as a woman writer. It visualizes cultural and ethical values and identity of tribal people. It is a small step to know and understand the ‘other’ people through Mahasweta Devi’s work. Mahasweta Devi is a well-known literary figure in Indian English Literature. Her work includes fiction, plays and short stories. She is a writer with purpose who tries to fill the gap between marginal and mainstream society. The main purpose of her writing is to present reality. Her writing career started in 1956 with Jhansir Rani which examines the after effects of struggle of Rani Lakshmibai with the Britishers. She is a regular contributor to Bortika, magazine dedicated to the cause of oppressed communities of India. There are many others such as Budhan and Dhol, entirely devoted to adivasis. She has won many awards for her devotion and struggle for tribals, poor and women. The publication of Hazaar Chaurasir Maa established her as a novelist and as a social being. One after another new jewels come to be added in her oeuvre and these works show her love and affection for oppressed people. At the same time, her works show her anger and fire against corrupt government officials and
oppressors. She appears before us only as a writer. Her motherly figure appears only for those who are sufferers and oppressed.

As a post-colonial writer, Mahasweta Devi mentions the features of post-colonial India. She describes the concept of nation which provides the sense of belongingness and ownership. Her country has the history of colonialism. Being a post-colonial writer, she visualizes the historical continuity and change. She constantly mentions struggle of oppressed against oppressor. She makes references to colonial India such as permanent settlement system, sanyasi revolt, the famine of 1770 but her centre of focus is the troubles, pains and shattered dreams of poor, downtrodden tribals and women. Her pen removes geographical, social, historical and cultural differences between different states. She finds that the stories of pain and oppression are the same everywhere. It fills the gap between different languages and cultures of states in India. On the other hand, it projects a huge gulf between rich oppressors and poor oppressed.

As a social activist, she raises the issues of bonded labour system, feudal system, prostitution, naxalism through her writing. She explains that these major problems destroy the dream of modern, civilized and developed India. She elaborates that these systems exploit and torture them at the sake of development. Her creations *Imaginary Maps, Rudali, Chotti Munda and His Arrow* all discuss these issues and connected them together.
As a woman writer, she expresses her concern for woman folk. She talks about their deplorable condition, their role and place in the Indian society. She shows that woman suffers because of her body and her class, caste or her role can not protect her from poverty, bonded prostitution and human trafficking. Mahasweta Devi portrays the female characters who are the victims of sexual exploitation, poverty in ‘Outcast: Four Stories’, ‘Breast Stories’, and ‘Imaginary Maps’.

She is constantly writing stories and articles. Her articles also spread awareness among the readers. She discusses the environmental disorder such as the plantation of Eucalyptus on a large scale, displacement of tribals, encroachment of forest land and tribal culture. Her work goes beyond the writing and her work has taken for films and drams such as Hazaar Chaurasir Maa and Jhansir Rani.

The chapter focuses on the study of selected work of Mahasweta Devi which discusses the exploitation, corruption, poverty. These works include Devi’s Imaginary Maps, Mother of 1084, Rudali, Five Plays, Outcast: Four Stories, Titu Mir, Chotti Munda and His Arrow, The Book of Hunter, and Breast Stories. Though there are some other works as well but the plays and stories selected for the study are those which carry the major issues of Indian society. These writings show different aspects of tribal culture and ethics, pains of poor and exploitation of woman. These stories show a deep concern for the ignored people and draw the attention of the readers towards them.
Chapter -2

From Bondage to Freedom:

Representation of Social Images and Reality

This chapter deals with the plight of poor and tribal communities of India. The chapter also explains the reasons for their terrible plight and describes the caste system, feudal system, bonded labour system and naxalism. Mahasweta Devi focuses on the social status of different tribal and poor people in the modern Indian society. The chapter focuses on Mahasweta Devi’s four major works- **Mother of 1084, Rudali, and Chotti Munda and His Arrow** and **Dust on the Road**.

**Mother of 1084** deals with naxalite movement and its deep impact on the lives of the people. The play concentrates on the universal significance of violence, resistance and self-determination. It reveals the ruthless, corrupt and hypocrite political and economic system of India. At the same time, it is a search for self-identity of a woman. The mother Sujata, in search of truth, realizes her own being as mother, as woman and as a human being. Mahasweta Devi is concerned for the agonies of motherhood through naxalism in India. Motherhood is a universal phenomenon which is presented by Mahasweta Devi through the character of Suajata and Somu’s mother. Mahasweta delineates other problems as well such as hypocrisy of upper caste, problem of poverty.
Hypocrisy is denoted by Somu’s family. Devi’s depiction of the poor people is realistic. She also exposes corruption.

In the same way *Rudali* shows the poverty, caste-discrimination, corruption etc. It also visualizes the exploitation through feudal system, religious beliefs and bonded labour system. It is the story of Shanichari who suffers after her family members’ death one by one. The deaths involve her in the religious ‘kriya’ ceremony. This ceremony explores how the ritualized system of religion has become the source of exploitation of the poor and a source of income for the exploiters. Mahasweta Devi links it with the bonded labour system. She shows the three angles which are connected with each other—religion with poverty and poverty with bonded labour system. Through various characters, Devi portrays real India. ‘Dulan’ is the speaker of Devi who draws the reality before readers. The character ‘Nathuni Singh’ denotes hypocrisy and falsehood. In *Rudali*, she describes the beautiful relation of love and friendship between Shanichari and Bikhni. They are very close. The death of Bikhni shatters Shanichari. Her death leaves her as shrewd and manipulative. Mahasweta Devi describes each and every emotion through their friendship. She projects each aspect of exploitation through different systems showing in ‘Rudali’.

The third work in the chapter which depicts the poor plight of tribes and poor, is *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The story discusses the problems of pre and post-colonial India. In this work,
Devi depicts the historical rebellion and legendary figure of Chotti Munda. She also depicts the feudal system and bonded labour system. She tells that these systems exploit only the oppressed tribals and poor outcastes. It becomes the earning source of moneylenders and the contractors. The system of bonded labour had been abolished in 1975 by an Ordinance but this story of Chotti Munda tells that laws are only for papers. The government projects provide hope of reform but the government officials who manage such projects snatch the money and earn their own profits. Mahasweta Devi also mentions caste-discrimination here. The low castes and adivasis never get the basic things to fulfill their needs. The high caste people think that low and tribals have no right to study, to be rich and if they try, they torture them. Devi presents the real picture of India where law and order never works. This story also brings to light the darkness of naxalism but in very rare incidents. The story mentions that when people raise the voice against corruption or oppression, they are labelled as naxalites. Devi highlights Baranagar-Kashipur Massacre in 1971. The historical incidents and legendary story of Chotti Munda clears the picture of exploitation and corrupt and hypocrite plans and laws.

Her **Dust on the Road** also deals with bonded labour system. It is the chain of slavery that passes from one generation to another. In this, she gives an account of only the system which never ends. She discusses the terrible system especially active in Bihar and West Bengal. It also depicts the condition of migrant labourers and
sexually exploited by the owners. Through this writing, she talks about contract labour also and reveals the realities of government records.

This chapter reveals the reality of laws, government projects and officials through four works—Mother of 1084, Rudali, and Chotti Munda and His Arrow and Dust on the Road. Through these, she raises the issues of bonded slavery, naxalism, corruption, poverty, exploitation, feudalism and caste-discrimination which are deeply rooted in Indian soil. She has presented these major issues with the power of words. She does not romanticize the reality. Though, she adds fiction with reality but she never covers it rather expose it ruthlessly.
Chapter- 3

Forgrounding The Local:

Ethical Consciousness at Work In Mahasweta Devi

This chapter highlights tribal communities, their culture, myths, traditions, ethics and history. Mahasweta Devi gives an account of the various tribes in India. She shows her concern for Munda, Oraon, Santhals and other large tribal communities. A tribe is a social group existing before the development of states. They are actually the oldest and longest surviving cultural groups. This chapter also describes their traditions and ways of living. The chapter covers her The Book of Hunter, Imaginary Maps: Three Stories, Five Plays and Titu Mir.

In The Book of Hunter, she shows the culture, life-style, myths and customs of Shabar tribe. It depicts that they are very close to nature, land and forest. Forest is their lifeline. She describes their culture of forest as they get food, shelter and lots of lessons of living learnt from nature. They follow jungle rules and never go against them. They know each and every aspect of land and forest. Their life moves around the forest. Different festivals like Abhyachandi, Banachandi; customs, myths, ceremonies all are based on nature. This work tells that they know how to maintain a balance between man and nature. She describes Shabars’ culture and tells that they respect and obey nature as they obey their
ancestors. She also raises the issue of industrialization and environment. Due to excessive cutting of trees, forest is destroyed and the community is forced to become bonded labour. But the main concern of this writing is the culture and myths of Shabars.

Her another story ‘The Hunt’ in the book entitled *Imaginary Maps* also depicts the festivals celebrated in the Oraon tribe. Mary Oraon is the central character through whom Mahasweta Devi describes the customs, festivals and the place of woman in Oraon tribe. The festival ‘The Hunt’ is celebrated at the spring season, an animal hunting festival. Devi tells that every twelfth year, women participate in the hunting festival, called ‘Janiparab’. Like men, women go out and kill animals. That year, men can not hunt. So, it is the time of hunting by women. Mary Oraon also takes part in it. She hunts the biggest beast, man, the tehsildar who has lustful eyes on Mary. She kills him because he wanted her only for his own lust. The story travels around the tribal culture but it also highlights the power and place of woman in tribal society. They give equal right to women, freedom and liberty. Another story of *Imaginary Maps*, ‘Pterodactyle, Puran Sahay and Pirtha’ also elaborate the culture and values of tribes. This work is also concerned with their vanished identity. Mahasweta Devi tells that the government records are completely different from reality. The injustice occurs everywhere. This work portrays connection with the environment, respect for their ancestors and myths, knowledge of medicinal plants and ignorance of their culture and identical
values in the Indian society. She narrates each and every aspect of tribal life through this work.

Her another work ‘Water’ in Five Plays discuss love and respect for their ancestors and connects it with the problem of caste-discrimination and naxalism. The protagonist, Maghai Dome is the traditional water diviner. Another character Santosh, is a village head, a local big landowner and moneylender. He pretends care and concern for backward and dalit but actually, he exploits the poor and uses relief funds of poors for his own desires. Maghai loves nature as he calls Ganga River a holy mother. He also emotionally attaches with the river Charsa and his wife, Phulmani calls her co-wife. Mahasweta Devi discusses the problem of naxalism as the outcome of exploitation. The exploitation of poor transforms them into naxals. She also presents their love and respect for ancestors. They inherit the knowledge, skill and culture from their forefathers just as Maghai does. He is not ready to quit the job of water diviner after excessive exploitation because it is his belief that his ancestors have chosen him to do this responsibility. He feels proud and never thinks of charging fees for divining water. This work also tells about the myth of Sing Bonga, Manasa, the snake goddess, Banjo, the goddess of rain, mother Baram, the goddess of forest and connects them with their customs and culture. This chapter discusses the culture of folk songs and oral tradition of Mizo tribes. Their songs reflect their zeal and
enthusiasm for Christmas and Easter. Their oral tradition is also linked with their rituals, customs and god/goddesses.

This chapter deals with legendary heroes of tribal communities. Devi’s another novel Titu Mir is a tribute to the great tribal revolutionary figure, Titu Mir. This work depicts the journey of Titu Mir as a boy and later as a warrior against exploitation. He emerges as a messiah for the common man. Through the legendary story of Titu Mir, Devi highlights Permanent Settlement Act, excessive tax/revenue, indigo Revolt, Sanayasi Revolt, famine of 1771 and other historical events. Titu Mir is a fighter who never tolerates oppression. He is the one who fights for oppressed farmers. The British East India Company wanted to make more money by sucking the poor farmers’ fertile land. Titu Mir takes stand for them. But his name doesn’t find a place in the Indian struggle for freedom. His enemies were scared even of his dead body as they believed his corpse was able to inspire or to illuminate another revolution. Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru had the same fire. They were famous and memorable names of Indian freedom struggle, but Titu Mir’s struggle was never noticed and would have possibly remained unheard if Mahasweta Devi had not written this work. She has taken him out of the hidden history of tribals.

This chapter also highlights the deeds of some others such as Chotti Munda, Birsa Munda, Bashai Tudu. Through them, Devi
tries to tell about their culture, beliefs, rituals, myths and their exploitation for the sake of modernity and development. Birsa Munda is the name who emerged to stop the exploitation of Munda tribe. The unwritten songs describe the happenings of his life. In Aranyer Adhikar, she discusses Beth Beggari system, forced labour, through the character of Dhani. The chapter also shows some great tribal movements such as Great Kol rebellion in 1831-32 by Ho tribe, revolt by Bhils in 1818, Bhagat movement of Oraon tribe, Santhal rebellion in 1855.

The chapter concentrates on the tribal culture, ethics, identity and legendary heroes. The chapter tells about different hidden aspects of tribal communities and hidden jewels.
CHAPTER- 4
From Consciousness to Canons:
Locating Women in the Socio-Ethical Environment

The chapter focuses on the role of Indian woman in the male-dominated society. It covers the movement of feminism that focuses on the rights and place of women in the society. The chapter discusses each and every role of women. It analyses Mahasweta Devi’s woman oriented stories such as Outcast: Four Stories, ‘Doulati the Bountiful’ in Imaginary Maps, Breast Stories, ‘Bayen’ in Five Plays. Through her woman characters, she again raises the major issues of bonded labour system, naxalism and crimes against women such as prostitution, sexual harassment. Her women are portrayed as wife, daughter, mother who suffered a lot. On the other hand, she portrays the emancipated woman also.

Her book Outcast: Four Stories highlights the life of four women. Dhouli is an untouchable and widow. Her story also highlights bonded labour system through her husband and depicts poverty after his death. His death visualizes the social bondages for a wife after her husband’s death. Her life becomes miserable. A change comes into her life with Misrilal, a Brahman, who shows his love for Dhouli and she become pregnant. Soon her life again changes when Misrilal leaves her alone with his child in her womb. For her livelihood, she falls in the pit of prostitution. All the events
project that crime is somewhere created by the society. The upper caste people show their concern for the morals of society and Dhouli leaves the place as she can not practice prostitution in the village. Another female character is Shanichari, an Oraon girl. She has become a prey of several sexual hungry beasts. She is sent to Kolkata for a job by Gohuman Bibi. There, the owner, Rahmat has used her to make others happy. Not only Shanichari but many other girls such as Joshmina, Lugri, Jhini also face such horrible situation. Soon, Shanichari is replaced by another girl and she becomes reja. She gets pregnant and returns to her people. But her own people do not accept her with a Diku’s child in her womb. She has become the victim of human trafficking but after returning, she has become the victim of marginalization by her own community. Another female protagonist is Josmina who is very happy with her husband, Sarjom Purti. Soon poverty and hunger drops them in the grip of Nandlal Shahu. He actually sells girls to make money. He sells Josmina and Sarjom to Niranjan where Josmina is sexually exploited by the owner. Then, Sarjom and Josmina run away from him but again falls into trap and Josmina is repeatedly exploited by Sukhram, Karnal Singh, Pritam Singh and many more and after getting pregnant commits suicide. Her story ends with her end. Then, Devi shows another woman, Chinta. She is a young widow who works as a maid in houses. She is also the victim of male-dominated society. She has three children. One from her husband and two girls from a man named Utsab, who has
promised her to marry, but leaves her with two daughters. At last, she sells her daughters for just ten and eight rupees. These stories raise the issues of caste-discrimination, poverty, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and most importantly respect of woman, which is actually always missing.

Devi explains one major social issue with a female character. Her another book *Imaginary Maps* contains a story of ‘Doulati the Bountiful’ who become the victim of bonded labour system, hypocrisy of a Brahman and bonded prostitution. Through her story of exploitation, she has raised several issues which disgrace the woman. Doulati becomes the victim of hypocrisy of Misraji and fall in the web of bonded labour system. She soon becomes a whore. She tells that girls and married women all are suffering the same pain just because they have to repay the loan but ironically, it cannot be repaid. Without the hope of freedom, they bear torture sexual and mental harassment. The story also shows that the low caste people are merely a commodity for high caste. Doulati suffers because her father was in the grip of bonded labour system. Then, she is converted into bonded prostitute. Due to the excessive sexual exploitation, a twenty seven years old girl has become a skeleton. And the story ends with her death which is actually the symbol of freedom. It knits many painful tales with Doulati’s story. Doulati is a daughter who has saved her father from bonded slavery. She suffers again and again and never raises her voice against such
crime. It shows the exploitation of a woman just for the sake of fun and making money.

Mahasweta Devi describes each role of woman in her writing. Doulati is portrayed as a daughter who sacrifices her life for her father. Next story is about a mother who becomes a professional mother for her family’s livelihood. ‘Breast Giver’ tells the life of Jasoda. She has number of children and earns by her motherhood only. In Indian society, mother has a specific place. She is a goddess who performs anything to save her children’s life. Here, Jasoda is also like any another mother of Indian society. For her husband and children’s sake, she performs the job of wet nurse. Her job raises her value as a mother. Her economic needs make her a divine figure and valuable place in the society. But her usefulness ends with the end of her commercial utility. People’s attitude towards her changes very fast and now, this is the time of her downfall. Not only her respect, but her health also degenerates. The doctor confirms her problem as breast cancer. Now, all are worried and start planning how to get rid of Jasoda. She is shifted to the hospital where every moment is painful for her and no one is there with her. She dies and is cremated by an untouchable.

Mahasweta Devi presents a mother, Jasoda who is a Brahman devoted to her husband. Even though, her husband has a doubt on her. For her husband and children, she takes a job as a professional mother. After falling sick, she is thrown out by the family for
whom she works. So, her story covers one major aspect of our Indian society merging with many little issues. The issue of woman’s respect is related with a woman’s role in men’s life, caste-system, exploitation of woman, ignorance of humanity, artificiality and hypocrisy.

The chapter presents another mother who also suffers because of superstitious thinking and gender discrimination. Chandidasi Gangadasi is the mother in ‘Bayen’, entitled Five Plays. She is grave-tender by profession. Her character as a woman shows that she is brave and courageous. At the same time, as a mother, she is kind-hearted and caring. Chandidasi tells her story in first person that her happy days with her husband and son are gone due to her profession. Her husband, Malinder narrates the story of his wife to his son, Bhagirath that shows the mythical background of his wife’s job. Just for the sake of superstitions, she is separated from her son. The love and respect for woman is again lost. Her work is to bury dead children. As a mother, it becomes difficult for her as she feels pain in burying the little dead bodies. Her pain becomes the reason of losing her own family. A mother is separated from her son. But no one can divide her motherly sensitivity from her heart. She is worried about her son and blames her husband for not taking care of him. Her son understands her love for him. The story ends with her death when she is trying to save the people of her community, those people who declared her a ‘bayen’ but her son rejects the title and tells them that she was his
late mother Chandidasi Gangadasi. Mahasweta is deeply concerned with the mother-son relationship. She also depicts the cruel society which separates a mother from her son. Jasoda and Chandidasi both had great love for children but the social system cut their relationship with their families. Mahasweta Devi describes inhumanity and cruelty of the superstitious communities. She also tells that she is a woman who becomes victim of social system of the male-dominated society.

The mother of **Mother of 1084**, Sujata has the same pain of separation. Though she is rich and upper class woman yet she is a poor mother who lost her son in naxalite movement. His death evokes his mother’s suppressed emotions and self-realization. She feels that she has lost herself somewhere. His death makes his mother conscious not to be suffered and exploited. Devi portrays mother who sacrifices her life, her health and her identity for her son. Through this picture, she tries to discover the real place of a mother in the Indian society.

The chapter highlights another woman, ‘Gangor’ from ‘Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Piche’, entitled **Breast Giver**. She is gang-raped in police custody and chooses prostitution as a profession. This story also shows the major problem of bonded labour system. It is the story which tells that such incidents are common in India. Another gang-rape in Devi’s story ‘Draupadi’ is that of Draupadi Mejhen. She is the wife of Dulna and they work
together in the fields. But due to the caste-discrimination and exploitation of low caste and poor people, Dulna and Dopdi actively contribute to the killing of few landlords. Mahasweta Devi presents the inhumanity, hypocrisy through the character of Senanayak. He is an educated upper class military officer who is very cruel. He orders to kill an unarmed man, Dulna that shows his inner cruelty. He shows that he is a brave soldier but actually he is not. The character of Dopdi is different. She is simple and a courageous comrade. Through her, Devi explores caste system, curse of bonded labour system, naxalite problem and exploitation of poor. She is the fighter who is ready to sacrifice her life for other’s sake. When Dopdi is caught by police, Senanayak orders to rape her but does not take part in it. So, she is gang-raped by his officers. Even then, she does not step back. On the contrary, she refuses to wear clothes and comes closer to Senanayak naked. Her reaction terrifies him. It shows that it is the place where male leadership stops. Mahasweta Devi gives her a mythological name ‘Draupadi’ from Mahabharata. She is a helpless figure fully dependent on the paternal powers for her respect and requirements. Devi’s Dopdi is a strong tribal girl who can fight anybody for her self-respect. This story projects the emancipation of woman in male-dominated society. With the importance of woman in Indian society, she describes other major issues that are inter-linked.
CHAPTER -5

Conclusion: Fictionalizing the Facts:
Establishing Mahasweta Devi As A Writer with Purpose

The chapter concludes the features of Mahasweta Devi as a post-colonial writer. Her work depicts the post-colonial issues which have roots in the British colonial era. The caste-system, feudalism, bonded labour system, corruption and naxalism all are deeply rooted and constantly growing in the post-modern period.

Mahasweta Devi shows deep concern and love for tribal and backward communities. She links all those issues with the suppressed life of indigenous people. She presents the real picture of India. She depicts every story straight forwardly. She never romanticizes it. She is always concerned with the preservation of the culture and identity of tribals. Their culture and identity are related to nature and their ancestors. Their culture is richer than the modern civilized Indian society. The love and respect for nature helps in maintaining a balance between man and nature. For the depiction of her stories, she uses the characters with mythical names such as Jasoda and Draupadi in Breast Stories. Through different stories, Devi describes various myths connected with tribal culture and life such as the myth of ‘abhyaachandi’, the myth of kalu Dome and many more. She presents the drawbacks of their
mythological connection on the life through ‘bayen’ in Five Plays. So, she never supports the bad practices that are prevalent even in the tribal communities. But it is seen that the myths related to their life help them to balance with nature; help them to learn many lessons of life. So, Devi re-generates their myths through her work.

Not only their myths, but their history of struggle is also re-told by Mahasweta Devi. She has re-called the historical figures and legendary heroes from tribal families. She tries to present their struggle for freedom which is actually not in a written form. Titu Mir, Chotti Munda, Birsa Munda are those freedom fighters who fought for their rights but never came into limelight.

Another feature of her writing is inter-mingling of characters and major issues. The character of Shanichari emerges in Rudali and Outcast: Four Stories. In the same way, she never discusses single issue in a story. She handles more than one problem in a single story. She also talks about laws and acts and deals with some historical facts such as Permanent Settlement Act, Anti-Bond Slavery Act.

Another feature of her work is her concern for nature. She depicts nature and linked it with human life. Draupadi’s rape is portrayed with the picture of nature. Mahasweta Devi is also concerned for tribal forest and fields and stresses upon maintaining an ecological balance. She has actively participated in many social works organized by NGOs. She has founded DNT-RAG which
especially works for them. Bortika also helps to convey true and terrible incidents in the lives of poor tribals.

She uses symbolism as a literary weapon to convey her meaning. ‘Arrow’ is the symbol of continuity, strength and culture. In the same way, ‘forest’, ‘Breast’, ‘Hunt’ and many other symbols are used to convey her message. She uses irony and de-tabooing words and parody. Her style of writing presents various problems and her grave concern for her people and country.

Mahasweta Devi comes forward as a mother, elder sister to those who are exploited. She has won many reputed awards and donates that awarded money to help them and to develop them without losing their culture and identity.