

Tribal Culture and Vocabulary of Resistance: A Study of Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the two writers with their literary writings have brought forward the issues and predicaments of tribal and Dalit communities. Mahasweta Devi is a comparatively highly prolific writer who has been called as the mouthpiece of the subalterns of the society. Mahasweta Devi raised her voice several times against the discrimination of marginalized through her short stories and novels. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a Santhal writer who belongs to an ethnic group. His stories deeply reflect the issues surrounding the Santhal community of India. He is working for the betterment of Santhal community so that they can become a part of the mainstream. This paper will discuss and focus on the style of writing employed by Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra portray the prosecution faced by Santhal people at the hands of elitist class and they are never giving up spirit in any situation. Their dialogue and action show their will to overcome from the shackles of tyranny inflicted on them. The language has a significant role in not only influencing the mind of readers, but also the government who are compelled to look and pay attention into their grievances. Thus, this paper will carefully observe how these writers became the voices of the poor and marginalized class by the use of violence and resistance in their language.

Keywords-Tribal Culture, Resistance, Subaltern, Violence, Language

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Most of us have easily been convinced of the invincible benefits of the modern democracy which promises fundamental rights and a basic minimum standard of living for all. However, the question of agency is at the core of my paper which uses language (or the absence of it) as a symbol to discuss the marginalization- the othering of the women and the tribal. This othering is even more pronounced when the woman happens to be tribal. The self of such a woman is twice deprived from achieving the ideal promised by contemporary modern democracy. My paper studies the state of woman and at the same time seeks to offer alternative solutions. One of the serious issues that comes up while in need to address the concerns of the marginalized is a perpetuated invisibility. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is of immense importance here. The question that calls for an answer is -Who gets to choose their own mode of existence. The absence of language is not merely a linguistic or syntactical issue but a systemic absence of a structure to receive and accept the experiences of the other. There is rampant objectification about the woman's body so much so that sex for food is the only option left for the extremely poor. Hansda's insistence on the oppressive nature of the politico-administrative setup is a revelation for young minds to come together and fight for the needy aiming to negotiate a dignified existence for women and the tribal communities. It is also important to understand that a blind push for urbanization has harmed the tribal women the most. Tribes till date live-in closely-knit communities with high interdependence on each other. Unabated urbanization without sensitivity for the pre-modern modes of existence has made many women vulnerable and homeless. Another question worth asking is- How far have the benefits of urban planned modernity reached the marginalized women. In contemporary India, female domestic labor both

by tribal women in urban middle class homes and unpaid female household work are to be understood as internalized ways of societal oppression so much so that the ability to cook is a benchmark for women of marriageable age. I alongside other recognized feminists have no patience with such an idea which aims to essentialize the identity of a woman. In tribal societies specifically as is true among the Munda's of Jharkhand, women are often the bread-weaners for the entire family. This is not to say that women in non-tribal societies do not do so. The point that I am interested in is that the pursuit to study the nature of a 'woman' is a project of masculine or pseudo feminist hubris. Progress and a better world are possible only when we look at the existential reality of women and the problems they face. It is appalling that most of the problems that woman face germinates inside their homes. At this point I would like to quote a popular meme which reads "Tradition is pear pressure from the dead people." This is true especially in the case of internalization of a subordinate position by women in the society. The age of symbolism that we have entered today seems superficially satisfied with exceedingly rare economically powerful and socially prominent women. The reality however is that if our country as per our constitution had not discriminated against women- a large number of female executives and leaders would have become a reality by now. Also, it must be noted that absolutist ideologies of the left and the right leave women isolated- an object for ideological propagation at a moment where the need of the hour is corrective and conscientious action. The authors that I analyze in my paper shed light on these prominent issues that must not be overlooked at any cost. The story of Rudali is interesting both politically and sociologically. The Rudali mourners are a prime example of the degradation of the moral compass of human beings. The subjugated acceptance of the given situation is the cause for worry for the modern thinker. It

is as if we have collectively failed as a society to share the fruits of development and modernization with those who are less privileged and therefore need more of our support. I see a sort of numbing acceptance of inhuman treatment to both the women and the tribal- each of whom have been commoditized and reduced to fulfilling the role of the professional mourner. It is necessary to recall the attention of the reader to the fact that as subjective a function as mourning has been outsourced to individuals who are recognized only as per their collective ability to wail. The conflict that arises within the human individual is that of absurdity- the wide gap between the expectations of human treatment we have from the modern world and the bone chilling apathy of the measure of a wailing woman in terms of money and food from the sradha ceremony of a Hindu. It is a curious fact to note that the priests and the high caste Brahman's would not partake of the food of a death ceremony. Thus, this food offering which becomes a much-awaited part of a Rudali's life is in fact a left over from the savarna Hindus. It is fruitful to pay attention to the use of language in the text. There is a clear dichotomy, a clear hierarchy in the use of language by the people belonging to the different sides of the caste narrative. The word used to refer to a Rudali is 'Randi' which translates to a whore in the polished English language. Indeed, the more polished translation into a prostitute would have given an identity to women who do not stand any such chance in the true evaluation of this cultural practice. Another remark I would like to make regarding the naming of a Dalit is the use of names like Sanichari. The word Shani referring to the Hindu Graha (a sort of demigod as per Hinduism) is symbolic of ill fate and an increasing dismay in the life of people that this 'graha' impacts. Sanichari is blamed for the death of her husband's death. Let us go a little into the sociological history of the Rudalis. This name was given to a group of professional mourners in Rajasthan

belonging from a lower caste. They were called into high caste families to publicly mourn the death of male members in the high caste families as weeping in sorrow was considered an act unbecoming of a woman of the zamindar family. The dual suppression of woman is clearly visible here. While the tag of being the honor of the family burdens the subjective self of high caste women that they cannot display their grief openly, it absurdly burdens the low caste women to be grind themselves in the sadness and gloom which is never internally felt. A Rudali feels estranged from her subjective self. She becomes an object of purchase and internalizes the fact over time. The issue of internalization has often been overlooked in the overarching narrative, but it is internalization which becomes the cause of intense suffering for women. It is to be noted that this suffering is institutional in nature and is therefore to be understood as a form of systemic oppression. Another debatable issue is polygamy within the lower castes of the society. While on the one hand it is understood as a denial of complete attachment to once partner and lack of marital fidelity, it also gives women a certain amount of freedom from the absolutely crushing 'responsibilities of family honor' that a high caste woman must face. It is these internal contradictions in the feminist movement that have prevented any absolute universal answer from emerging. It is as if every woman must negotiate her own being/non bring through her own actions. Superstitions that make their way through in the Indigenous society have a greater bearing on the women of the society. The upper caste women in the story believe that the vaccination for smallpox contains cow's blood and therefore the low caste woman who take the vaccine are sinning. A woman's statement that the lower castes treat both the government's vaccine as God and pray to the goddess of smallpox for relief. This is the most existentially charged statement in the story. It shows how the woman from the

lower castes put in all they can to negotiate a bare minimum existence without daring to displease anyone. Ironically, it is quiet adherence that allows these women to avoid annihilation. I assert that for these women there is no philosophical existential release- there actually is no exit. It is survival itself that is in a way a day-to-day resistance.

There is an instance in the story Rudali where Sanichari is not able to cry. This is in fact her distance from the object that has died. In an instant Sanichari thinks- her tears were reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them. A constant commodification of the woman's body is one of the prime motifs in this story. The normalization of a patronizing patriarchy on the societal scale is one of the revelations of this story. Characters in the story play their respective roles without much visible resistance. Indeed, the story is a primary example of the decay of a fossilized, feudalized society. The solution to this problem is an internal change- a call to the being to reinvent oneself. This means a radical change in the way people imagine and comprehend the matrix of public and private social relations. A post humanist approach provokes the reader to challenge the legitimacy of the social order that limits the existence of woman. It is also noteworthy that these forces which control the women's lives are all outside their daily lives. These obligatory social behaviors are an obstacle in the realization of an independent self by women. It is my perception that the solution lies not in some radically opposing short lived feminist agitation but a concentrated effort by various stakeholders to bring a change in the lives of women. The male perception of female lives and the social sensitization of people to promote a rational environment free of superstitions is the need of the hour. The irony is that the contemporary reality is a gross admixture of modernity and pre modernity that disallows egalitarian rules like the uniform civil code. I insist that caste

and the tribal identity are just two of the lenses amongst many other approaches to understand the 'reality' of existence as a woman in the contemporary Indigenous society. The upbringing of young children who are going to become the next generation of our country is a major point of concern in this regard. Swami Vivekananda had correctly suggested that the worth of a society can be measured in terms of how that society treats its women. A curious question that arises here is why is it that the liberalized and globalized world has failed to deliver upon its promises of self-dependency to women. Though it cannot be said without a sweeping and wrong generalization that no progress has been made but it can safely and quite importantly be insisted that a vital change is the need of the hour. This is possible when each of us is ready to take a certain amount of responsibility and thereby participate in the bigger change in their own capabilities. Privilege must be pointed out. It is not just enough to cry foul about the repression. The systemic and sustained mechanisms of discrimination must point out and changed. This I do not feel requires radical revolution or a complete redistribution of material resources as was misunderstood by several communists and Marxists. The need on the contrary is way beyond merely material. It is a sociological necessity to change the mindsets of people- it is a necessity which would call upon the social psychology to change collectively.

Sowvendra Hansda from Jharkhand who belongs from the Santhal community has written about tribal women and their ordeals. Let us now focus on the story *November is The Month of Migration*. This short story describes a pattern in the lives of the Santhals, In the month of November, Hansda says the Santhals start migrating to a small village of Burdwan, West Bengal. These migrant laborers would work under inhuman conditions without any guarantees of a basic dignified pay and humane treatment, not only that, but these laborers would also have to compete against

each other at abysmally low rates to win work for themselves and a mean favor of their draconian and selfish masters. The proprietors on the other hand have just one motive- extracting increased labor at minimal costs and ensuring that there is no uprising or revolt against this, it is extremely easy to draw parallels between capitalistic oppression and the oppression of the workers by the property owners. The fact however is that this is a feudal set up existing in contemporary modern society. It is due to such realities regarding the Indian socio-political scene that I would like to classify India as a premodern society despite the technological and economic advancements that have been accumulated in the hands of a select view. In fact, developing countries like India in the South Asian region have been caught in the perverse trap of an admixture of half formed capitalism and the dead but alive carcass of feudalism. The role that the caste system practiced by the majority group of Hindu's plays in the marginalization of the Adivasis and more, so the Adivasi women is also worth taking note. The words that are used for the Adivasis were Atishudra (extremely low born) and the Antyaj (differently understood as to be defeated till the end in all their lives or to be situated at the end of the city). The woman of these communities were the worst sufferers as they did not even have the protection of being the 'high born.' At this point it is necessary to point out one of the core scenes of the story that we are discussing here. At a point in the story, a tribal woman is seen by a police officer who has a loaf of bread in his hand. This scene is particularly moving because it degrades human pride and morality to the level of an animal. This is not merely a tour de force or an imaginative whim of the writer but is sadly a mirror to the society in which we live. This is therefore alarming. The passivity with which Tala Mai lets herself be made into a commodity for sex in exchange of food and fifty rupees is appalling. Indeed, it is a slap on the face of the promises of liberal and modern

democracy. The reality clear and it is unpleasant- a reality that a conscience possessing person can never make peace with. The question that arises than is what went wrong with the free society and free capital models that we have propagated in the last two centuries. This is not to say that Marxism has been any better. Both the grand world philosophies have failed the people or at least gravely disillusioned them. The way out is to negotiate a unique philosophy of existence for every individual. Individual upliftment of the human soul side by side with effective social interventions can help us to bring about a better world. A sense of collective belongingness that the Adivasis possessed and prized has been lost in the blind chase of capitalistic pursuits and the illusory promises. A cautious observer would clearly understand that modernity has brought with itself as many ill giving's as it has benefited the people. More alarmingly, the age-old superstitions of people have not yet gone away. On the contrary these practices have thrived and suppressed the large masses bypassing the law. For instance, the democratic governance in the Indian mainland accepts monogamy only as the acceptable form of social life. The tribal communities on the contrary have had polygamy well ingrained in their social fabric. It is amazingly easy to dub the western standards of human life as the human values and due to the natural and politically created unequal distribution of economic and therefore diplomatic resources, such views often easily gain universal acceptability. But the call of the moment is to try and comprehend each living community on its own terms. The postmodern understanding of the instability of value judgements has made it clear that there is no transcendental value and therefore we must keep away from absolutist values and try to propagate a culture of plurality.

Now let us now look at another story by Hansda titled *November is the month of Migration*. This story is about a middle-class man migrating from Jharkhand to Vadodara. The problem of food takes centre stage here. Non vegetarianism is a big issue in the ‘pious city’ of Vadodara. The direct reference to Mr. Soren’s being a tribal is a marker of how the tribal identity is looked down upon. It is also interesting to note the fact that women lose out on access to food choices as even today in middle class and lower middle-class families it is mostly men that go out for work. The problem however is bigger here. The problem here is of social stigmatization of a particular eating habit. More than that there is a castigation of people who belong to a specific tribe. In the contemporary context, the Nukkad Natak has again reemerged as a prominent form of resistance to tribal oppression by the mainstream population. It is also relevant to see how far the democratic republican ideal has served the cause of these marginalised people. It is my contention that free market capitalism has more than harmed the tribal people. It has made them slaves to a system which is inherently hierarchical and contrary to humanistic rules. It legitimizes profiteering in lieu of the subjective agency of a human being. The very term human resources are problematic in that sense. The idea that the term human resources enshrine is that human beings are means to the end of profiteering. But the contemporary corporate lobbies are so strong that they have started influencing the Accademia which is funding starved to propagate capitalism as the soul way of progress. The community mode of living of a tribal is interrupted when such a viewpoint towards the world is developed. I insist that it is in fact the tribal mode of living life that is organized in perennial association with the *oikos*. This reminds me of the active revolt of William Wordsworth against the intrusion of privately constructed British Railways into the Lake District. It is not merely economic

utilization that helps us to realize the full potential of a resource. It is in fact the intrinsic, the natural essence of the object that matters. The phenomenon that has occurred because of rapid urbanization and industrialization is that the tribal spaces have been disproportionately harmed and there has been a tendency to label them as backward and underdeveloped. Forested areas which were earlier community owned are now being given to private builders for infrastructure creation and speculative profiteering. In the last two decades, the environment has given clear examples of how human recklessness is creating an atmosphere of environmental existential anxiety. It can be stated without a speck of doubt that the advantages and disadvantages of environmental degradation are faced unequally by the privileged and the vulnerable. However, it would be catastrophic to assume that the deterioration of the environment would only create problems for the poor. We are living in a globalized world albeit the protectionist economic and political ideologies being promoted by most developed and rapidly developing countries- even in so called republican democracies. True justice is never exclusivist and does not leave people out based on caste, gender, tribal identity, or any other marker. Another big problem is the practice of invasive inclusion that attempts to erase the identity of the other. Both, the Christian Missionaries in India, and the currently in-power Hindutva forces are to blame for such a problem. My contention is that Indian democracy by constitution is of only positive interference into religious life based on the principle of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*. The concept of the best God to follow should be a private affair but the contemporary practice of religions like Christianity has lured people into the 'love of the one and only God' with funding from Christian majority-one religion, one nation secular countries. On the other hand, the Hindutva politics is decadent and backward looking as it aims to achieve some kind of mythical Bharat where in a Hindu

Rashtra-other religions can exist but only after allegiance and submission to the Hindu ways of life. The tribal identity is threatened by both these invasive ideologies as tribal life and religion is vastly different from these contemporary forms of organized religion. They are in a sense naturalistic and animistic belief system which subscribe to a kind of pantheism. To understand this pantheistic approach, there is a need for contemporary researchers have called panpsychism- a sort of mindset that allows the people to believe in a universal god or at least have a broad enough mindset to accept people from different religions as participants of the same socio-political system.

Towards the end of this paper, I wish to bring the attention of the reader to the short story *The Adivasi Will not Dance*. This dance is a metaphorical dance that the community has been subjected to since ages. They have been included geographically within India, but the Indian state has failed at inclusive governance (despite the much-applauded Panchayati Raj experiment that indeed is commendable to a certain extent.). The top-down approach to governance has failed the people and therefore incidents like pathalgadhi (not recognizing the government and establishing a self-styled government as a community.) A stone is placed a specific place marking the area as out of access and control of the ruling government. Clearly this happens because elected democracy as a form of governance fails to fulfill the needs and aspirations of the society- it fails to hear voices that are silenced long since. I suggest individual action and an incisive and humane worldview for every individual as a remedy instead of merely expecting from an elected government which distances itself from the population that it rules.



Citations

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